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# ハイ☆スピード!





**High Speed!**

By Ohji Kouji

Illustrations by Nishiya Futoshi

# ハイスピード!



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## Hazuki Nagisa

One year younger than Haruka, in fifth grade. Naive. Innocent and uncomplicated. Admires Haruka, and is very attached to him.



はづき なぎさ  
**葉月 渚**

遙の一つ年下で5年生。  
天真爛漫。純粹で単純。  
遙に憧れており、  
遙に懐いている。

まつおか りん  
**松岡 凛**

遙達の学校に転校して来た。  
お調子者でよくしゃべる性格  
だが、計画的で鋭い洞察力を  
持っている。  
遙に一目を置いている。



## Matsuoka Rin

Transferred into school with Haruka and the others. He has a talkative and frivolous disposition, but is also calculating and keenly insightful. Acknowledges Haruka's skills as superior to his own.



**Nanase Haruka**

Unsociable and expressionless, but gives off a sense of great energy. He is fixated on freestyle, and will not swim anything else. His stroke is refined and beautiful.

ななせ はるか  
**七瀬 遙**

無愛想で無表情だが、強いエネルギーの放出を感じさせる。フリーにこだわりを持っており、フリー以外は泳がない。その泳ぎは優雅で美しい。



たちばな まこと  
**橘 真琴**

遙の幼馴染で親友。明るくお人よしで思いやりがあり、よく遙の世話を焼きたがる。力任せに泳ぐ癖がある。



**Tachibana Makoto**

Haruka's best friend since childhood. Cheerful, kind-hearted and thoughtful, he often tries to mother-hen over Haruka. He tends to go all-out when swimming.





「速いな。」

ほんとに小学生？」

"You're fast. Are you really a grade-schooler?"



"You're Matsuoka-kun from Sano SC, aren't you?"

「君  
たしか佐野SCの  
松岡君だよな」






"Haru, Haru!"

「ハル、  
ハル！」







Rin had never seen anyone that terrified  
by something before.

人がそこまで何かにおびえる姿を、  
凜は見たことがなかった。





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# マイ★スピード!



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## CHAPTER 1

### Swim

*The water is alive. Even at times when the water's surface stretches out in silence, when not even faint ripples can be seen, it is just holding its breath, as if waiting for its prey. And, if you were to jump in, with a momentary spray of droplets, it will instantly bare its fangs and attack. It will wrap itself around your body, trying to steal the freedom from your limbs. The more you struggle, the more heavily and persistently it will coil itself, and before long, all your strength will be exhausted.*

*However, if you adjust your position without struggling, the water will become calm. From there, push your fingertips to the space at the water's surface and create an opening, then slowly slide your body forward - your arms, your head, your chest, your stomach, and your legs.*

*Do not reject the water, accept it. Do not deny the water, acknowledge its existence. The important thing is to take in the water; to feel it with your skin, your eyes, your soul. Not doubting the things that you feel. Believing in yourself.*

Haruka put his hand on the wall of the pool and lifted his face out of the water. Even though he had just swum the thousand-meter crawl, he wasn't at all out of breath. When he got his goggles off, there was a hand being held out in front of him. His eyes followed the arm up. A boy named Makoto was looking down at Haruka with a friendly smile.

For a sixth grader, Makoto was a good bit larger than average. He had broad, solidly built shoulders, and riding just above them, a face young enough that it looked out of balance with the rest of him. He also had kind-looking, upturned eyebrows. That was Tachibana Makoto.

Haruka took his hand, and was pulled out of the pool with an amount of strength that was surprising coming from that smiling face with its upturned eyebrows.

"You swim as gracefully as ever. It's like you're a dolphin, Haru-chan."

"I think it's about time you stopped putting '-chan' on my name."

He didn't have Makoto's height, but his slender, tense body gave off a sense of energy that didn't seem to come from his muscularity. Also, there was a look in his eye that somehow made him appear fast. That was Nanase Haruka.



The two of them had been going to the Iwatobi Swim Club for three years already. It had originally been Makoto's suggestion, and Haruka just went along with it; even now, he still felt that way.

The only things they had in common were that they went to the same school and were members of the same swim club. And one other thing - they both had girly names.

Makoto didn't mind much, but Haruka was stuck on that last point. He hated being teased about his name more than anything, and whenever he could, he only used his surname in public. Even so, at times when he absolutely had to say his first name, he was in the habit of looking fixedly to the side and whispering it as quietly as he could. Whenever he saw that happen, Makoto would look amused.

"I get it. So, are you already done for the day, Haru?"

That was what Makoto, who had called him "Haru-chan" since kindergarten, decided to call him. With just that change of name, it felt like their relationship changed, too.

"I told you, you don't need to put my name at the end of every sentence. And call me by my last name."

Though he wasn't angry, he spoke curtly, in a commanding tone. It was how he always was.

Without seeming bothered at all, Makoto just kept smiling and replied,

"Haru, you call me 'Makoto', don't you? Should I call you 'Haruka', then?"

Haruka shrugged his shoulders at the unfamiliar form of address.

"If you call me that, I won't talk to you anymore."

"Well, then, I'll definitely go with 'Haru'."

It always ended up that way. No matter how loudly Haruka tried to talk over him, no matter how hard Haruka tried to resist, in the end things would eventually go Makoto's way. At times like these, Haruka would shut his mouth and look to the side. Talking about it anymore would be annoying, but on the other hand, there was no way he was going to just give in completely, either. In Haruka's case, he showed that with his behavior, by silently looking away.

Makoto settled his goggles into place as he stood on the starting block, and then, in a flash, he jumped in. Water splashed everywhere. Unlike Haruka, he forced his way



through the water with an almost violent stroke and a thrashing kick. He was like an orca ferociously pursuing its prey.

Without waiting to watch Makoto reach the wall fifty meters away, Haruka headed to the shower room.

*I want to hurry and wash off this pool water that's gotten all lukewarm because of Makoto.*

Thinking only that, he roughly stripped off his cap.



A northerly wind blew, making the poplar branches rustle. There were no leaves left to fall, and the trees trembled like the voice of an old man asking for forgiveness.

In front of Iwatobi Elementary School's main entrance, a broad, two-lane street narrowed into a poplar-lined road where there wasn't even enough room for cars to pass each other, and continued at that width until the next intersection. Because there wasn't much to block it, in the winter there was no choice but to walk with the wind in your face. The children who went there would determinedly hunch their shoulders and close their mouths tightly against the cold.

It was in this season, just as the new year began, that Matsuoka Rin transferred into the school.

"My name is Matsuoka Rin. I came here from Sano Elementary School. I have a girly name, but I'm definitely a guy! I hope we all get along."

The classroom fell suddenly silent.

*Maybe they're nervous, being faced with a new classmate. Or maybe the class is full of habitually quiet honor students.*

But he didn't have long to think that, as the silence quickly turned to chatter.

*Well, I'm an out-of-season transfer student, since I came in January of sixth year, and on top of that, I have a girly name, so their reaction is only natural.*

While Rin was thinking that and looking out over the classroom, one of the boys stood up.

"Matsuoka-kun!"



It was Tachibana Makoto. He was looking at Rin happily, with a friendly smile on his face.

Rin had already known that he went to this school, but...

"...Tachibana-kun? I didn't know you were in this class."

"Yeah, I am. Haru-cha--I mean, Haru is with us, too."

Makoto turned his head to look to the side. In the spot he was looking at, Haruka sat, staring at Rin just as expressionlessly as ever.

"I see...Nanase-kun is here, too."

*Nanase Haruka. Acting just as unsociable as always. I knew he went here, too, but I didn't think we'd be in the same class.*

The three of them had several things in common. They were all sixth graders, they were all swimmers, and they all had girly names. And now, being in the same class was added to that list. The class started chattering once again, wondering how the three of them knew each other. This mystery became the subject of their curiosity and drew everyone's interest.

At recess, it wasn't an uncommon sight to see classmates gathered around the transfer student. In a way, you could say that was a transfer student's fate - to be met with a barrage of questions, to be pumped thoroughly for information, to be laid completely bare. To be made to talk about things that even close friends don't know each other well enough to want to talk about. Even so, in order to do well as a transfer student, the first impression is very important. No matter what the question, it must be answered clearly, with a smile.

However, as you might expect, by the end of the third break time, Rin was finally beginning to get tired. So, when afternoon break came around, he lined up with the others who had finished eating.

*Well, time to go start the second half of today.*

Just as he was taking a deep breath to prepare himself, someone put their hand on Rin's shoulder. Though there wasn't much strength in it, he could feel a strong energy from the hand, and he frowned a little. Even without turning, he knew. It was Haruka. He couldn't think of anyone else in their class who would do that.

"Come with me for a second."

Without saying anything else, Haruka started walking ahead by himself.



Rin watched him go and took in a breath, shocked by Haruka's pushiness. For a moment, he wanted to throw his arms out like a foreigner, but then he thought,

*That kind of affected pose wouldn't suit a transfer student, would it?*

So he didn't. While he was watching Haruka's back, wondering what to do, someone unexpectedly gave him a gentle push from behind, and he stumbled forward a bit.

"What are you doing? You're being left behind."

Makoto's smile passed by on Rin's side.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going."

Rin felt someone's gaze on him and looked around to see that the whole class was watching the three of them with eyes full of curiosity.

*It's a good thing I didn't take that completely ridiculous pose,* he thought.

Then, as if running away from their gazes, Rin hurried after Makoto.



Haruka's steps stopped between the school building and the pool. Above them, the branches of a large cherry tree spread without leaves or flowers, filled instead with the cold of winter. Almost as if it was looking for something, it faced toward the distant sky and stretched with all of its might. The cherry tree had been there since long before the school had been built.

Rin spoke up, his voice out of tune with the mood.

"Whoa, that tree's amazing! Is it a cherry tree or something?"

*It's a cherry tree,* Haruka thought, but didn't say.

"It's a cherry tree,"

Makoto said, laughing because he understood what Haruka was thinking.

Rin put his hand on the trunk of the cherry tree and looked up at the sky through a gap in the complex tangle of branches.

"Hey, when it's spring, and the cherry blossoms fall, a lot will drop into that pool, huh?"



Haruka and Makoto looked toward the pool. Since no maintenance had been done, the dead leaves that had fallen were scattered all over it.

"I want to try swimming like that sometime, in a pool full of cherry blossoms."

Rin said, sounding strangely emotional.

Makoto took a long look at the face he was making.

"At that time of year, the water would still be cold, so you wouldn't be able to. I really think it's better to swim in the summer."

Haruka was shocked.

"You plan to still be here next year?"

His voice mingled with the sound of the branches crying in the north wind, which drowned him out.

Rin took his hand off the cherry tree and put it into his pocket.

"What's the idea, calling me out to a place like this? Do you prank the transfer student on the first day, or something?"

As he said it, Rin started laughing, as if he found the idea funny. Caught up in his amusement, Makoto laughed, too.

Haruka looked on with cold eyes, and Makoto lightly cleared his throat and turned back to Rin.

"No, Matsuoka-kun. Jokes aside, there's something we want to ask you."

Before Makoto had finished what he was saying, Rin interrupted him.

"It was a coincidence, seriously, a coincidence. When we moved, I happened to end up at this school. I was surprised, too! I never thought I'd end up in the same class as you guys. It's a pretty freaky coincidence, huh?"

They had met Rin several times before at town swim meets. That was their only connection. They weren't what you'd call especially close; they'd barely even had a normal conversation.





It happened last March. The first one to come and talk to the others was Rin.

"You're fast. Are you really a grade-schooler?"

It wasn't clear whether he was talking to Haruka or Makoto, but either way, it was Makoto who answered in that instance.

"You're Matsuoka-kun from Sano SC, aren't you?"

He remembered that Rin had looked really happy when he heard that.

"Ah, you knew!"

It was the first time they had participated in a town swim meet. Haruka had won in the hundred meter freestyle, and Makoto had won in the hundred meter breaststroke, but in the fifty meter races, both wins were taken by Sano SC. By Sano SC's Rin, specifically.

"They only had long course today, but if they had short course, I bet I could have won the hundred meter, too."

He didn't sound like he was being a sore loser or like he was trying to be tough. They thought he was probably right. Both Haruka and Makoto had yielded to Rin at the start. They had only overtaken him at around seventy meters - in other words, after they had made the turn.

Though Haruka had won, he wasn't particularly happy. He didn't care about winning or losing. He had never once swum for the sake of winning. He just felt strangely irritated at the discrepancy between their starts.

When Haruka had overtaken Rin and reached the goal, Makoto was as happy for him as he had been for himself.

"Congratulations! It's great that you won!"

*As if you didn't just win yourself,* Haruka thought, but instead said something else.

"Who's that?" He pointed at Rin, who was lying sprawled out by the poolside.

"They called him Matsuoka-kun, from Sano SC."

It wasn't a name that he'd known before, but now that he knew it, it didn't make much difference. Haruka just wanted to remember him: the opponent who had annoyed him so. The way he looked, lying there with his goggles still on, chest heaving.

*I wonder if he's crying.*



That was what Haruka was thinking when Rin disappeared from sight for a moment, and then Haruka turned away. It was after this that Rin had come to talk to them. They only spoke for the short time until the awards ceremony.

"I've got to work on my strength some more, too."

Rin was about the same height as Haruka, but had achieved very good balance; indeed, you could say that his physique was well-suited to competitive swimming.

"I don't think it's just about strength, though," Haruka said.

He had never once swum a race relying on strength alone.

As always, it fell to Makoto to follow up on his comment.

"Matsuoka-kun, your underwater kick off your start was amazing. I was surprised that you could fly through the water like that!"

Suddenly, someone called out to Rin from a ways off.

"Hey, Rin! The awards ceremony is about to start!"

"I got it, Sousuke! I'll be there in a second!" Rin answered, then turned back to Haruka and Makoto.

"I won't lose next time. Let's swim together again, yeah?"

He waved easily as he left.

"We'll work hard so that we don't lose to you, either!"

Makoto returned with a grin.

"Ah, look, look, the awards ceremony is starting!"

He pushed on Haruka's back as he said this.

That was how they had met Rin. Since then, they'd seen him at nearly every meet they'd gone to.



The cherry tree's branches were tossed by a sudden gust of wind, and they bent with a great groan. Dust was kicked up, and all three boys reflexively closed their eyes.



For just a moment, an incredibly strong whirlwind blew past them. The dusty wind roared off toward the schoolyard, swirling left and right, running riot as it pleased.

Rin stared after the wind, spitting out some dirt.

"What the heck is with the wind today? Ugh, I've got sand in my mouth. Is the wind always like that around here?"

He spat again.

"It definitely doesn't usually gust like that. I thought we were going to be blown away! Come on, let's go back into the school, Haru."

Before he had even finished speaking, Makoto had turned his steps toward the school building. The other children who had been playing in the yard were also running back toward the school as if they were being chased by the wind.

It wasn't as if Haruka had brought Rin here to show him the cherry tree. He still hadn't asked Rin anything, or figured anything out.

*Did I get cheated by the wind?* he thought, feeling frustrated.

He still didn't know whether Rin's transfer was just a coincidence. However, it was easy for Haruka to guess that it was going to affect both himself and Makoto in some way. However it affected them, it was going to be troublesome.

Haruka would pass on getting wrapped up in it. That was why he had called Rin out here, intending to warn him away, but he felt like pursuing the matter any further would just be a bother. The more he obsessed about it, the further he'd get drawn in, anyway.

Turning his gaze away from Rin, who was running off toward the school building, Haruka looked up just once at the wind-tossed branches of the cherry tree.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Water*

On a modestly-sized mountain overlooking a small fishing harbor stood the Misagozaki Shrine. About halfway up the stone steps leading to the shrine stood a single torii<sup>1</sup> with a chouzuya<sup>2</sup> nearby, and at the place where the steps ended, two more torii stood waiting, their backs to the shrine grounds. Just behind the grounds spread the sea, sparkling with reflected sunlight; the view from the Misagozaki Shrine was so majestic that it had been written about by poets long ago.

There wasn't much of a coastal plain, so the harbor town was small, the houses jostling against one another as if pressing their shoulders together. Surrounded on all four sides by mountains and ocean, with only one road in or out, the town of Iwatobi was, in effect, a small island of land. The town couldn't be supported by just the coastal plain, so it spread out to the forested paths on the mountain slopes, right up to the stone steps of the Misagozaki Shrine, the houses pinching in close on either side.

It was a shrine that held a lot of history; though it looked antique, the magnificent structure stood full of dignity, and various ceremonies were held there. In the fall, they had a lively ritual of carrying a portable shrine down the long stone steps in one run, and then, after it had been carried all the way around the harbor once, it was thrown into the sea. This was supposed to be a ritual of thanks for good harvests, but as for why the shrine was thrown into the sea, there wasn't really an answer beyond the fact that it was, after all, a fishing town.

As a shrine overlooking a harbor, the Misagozaki Shrine naturally had taken on the duty of watching over the safety of the town's fishing. Because of this, all of the fishermen would clap their hands in prayer on the decks of their boats before they went out to sea. And so the shrine watched over harvest time and prayed for bountiful fishing, and occasionally even took care of prayers for good grades or a safe childbirth, all while giving thanks and worshipping.

Haruka's house was about halfway up the stone steps to the Misagozaki Shrine, around a corner to the left of the place where the chouzuya stood near the lone torii. No matter where he wanted to go, he had to climb either up or down the stairs to get there. There was another road, but the haphazard flood of houses had made it winding, narrow, and maze-like, to the point that climbing down the shrine steps

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<sup>1</sup> The large, free-standing archways typically seen at Shinto shrines. Often painted bright red.

<sup>2</sup> A place for cleansing your hands and mouth with water before visiting a shrine.



was certainly faster than trying to pass through it. And so, Haruka would leave his bike parked at the base of the stone steps.

When Haruka headed off to swim practice, once he'd left his house, he'd go the rest of the way by bike. After he got home from school, he would shove everything he needed into his bag and then hurry out of the foyer. After descending the stone steps, he would look up at Makoto's house. Makoto's house was pressed in close, facing the stone steps, and the stairs leading up to its entryway stretched to meet the base of shrine's stairway. Usually he timed it so that he could meet up with Makoto and his smile, but today it looked like Makoto was running late.

It wasn't as if they had promised to meet, and there wasn't any need for him to wait. Makoto had a younger brother and sister in kindergarten, and they often managed to drag him off one way or another. Haruka righted his bike and pressed his feet down on the pedals. Makoto might catch up with him on the way, and they'd meet at swim practice anyway. It was better for both of them that Haruka hurry up and get going, rather than wait here getting irritated.

Haruka looked up the steps to Makoto's house one more time, and then pressed down hard on his bike's pedals.

It took about ten minutes to ride to swim practice. Along the way, he had to cross a class-A river called the Shiwagawa. During the winter, the wind always blew along this river. After he had crossed the Mutsuki Bridge over this river and ridden along the opposite bank for a short while, he would begin to hear the sound of waves. In the port at the harbor, the white fishing boats would be clustered together in their moorings, giving proof to the fact that this was a fishing village. As he passed the harbor, he would glance out of the corner of his eye at the countless white masts swaying in the waves; just beyond the bay was Iwatobi SC.

Haruka passed through the town of Iwatobi, drawing closer to the Mutsuki Bridge. Just as he was starting to cross the bridge, the wind blew in hard from one side, and without thinking, he tightened his face into a grimace. The wind was especially strong today. As he made his way to the middle of the bridge, buffeted by the wind, he caught sight of the gloomy-looking form of Yazaki Aki lingering by the river. For some reason, she'd stopped her bike and was peering into the river's surface.

They were in the same class, and she also was a member of Iwatobi's swim club. That was all she had in common with Haruka.

When he got closer, Haruka could see Aki's troubled face more clearly.

*Should I just keep quiet and go past her? Or would it be better to at least say something?*

Unsure, he looked over his shoulder, but Makoto didn't seem to have caught up yet.

*Why am I wondering about something so pointless? Why am I looking to Makoto for help?*

As Haruka was scolding himself within his heart, Aki realized that he was there, and turned to him with a sad smile.

"Ah, Nanase-kun."

"Hey. What's wrong?"

He gripped his brakes, coming to a stop in front of Aki.

"Um, my scarf..."

Saying this, Aki dropped her gaze to the river. Following her line of sight, Haruka could see a white scarf drifting along in the flow. As might be expected of a class-A river, the Shiwagawa was quite wide. Even if he crossed the bridge and climbed down the bank, he wouldn't be able to reach the place where the scarf was floating.

"It's impossible. You'll have to give up."

*I wonder if I sounded too cold?*

After he said it, he was a little worried, but realistically, there was nothing to be done.

"Yeah..."

*Even though she understands that it's impossible, maybe she can't make herself give up?*

It looked like Aki still hadn't taken her gaze off the drifting scarf. Haruka turned his eyes away from the face that was so unlike Aki's usual self, putting his feet back on the bike's pedals.

"I'm going on ahead."

"Yeah..."

Before Aki could respond any further, Haruka began pushing the pedals. He finished crossing the Mutsuki Bridge, feeling Aki get further away behind him. As he rode along the riverbank, the white, floating scarf kept catching the edge of his vision. Haruka turned his eyes away from the river and pointed his bike toward Iwatobi SC.



Makoto showed up at the dressing room just as Haruka was about to put on his goggles.

"I'm sorry, Haruka! Just as I was about to leave, the fishbowl got dirty, and I had to clean it a bit. That's why I was late."

*You could have done that after you got home.*

Haruka looked at Makoto, who was already changing, trying to convey this thought with his eyes. Unexpectedly, Aki flitted through the corner of his mind.

*When Makoto crossed the bridge, was Aki still there?*

"Earlier, on the bridge..." he started to say, but then thought, *it doesn't really matter either way*, and stopped.

"What? Did something happen on the bridge?"

"No, never mind. It's nothing."

"That reminds me, when I was crossing the bridge, Zaki-chan was there, too. She seemed sort of upset."

Aki was known by the nickname "Zaki". It had apparently been made up by putting "Yazaki" and "Aki" together. Makoto always put "-chan" on the end when he talked about her.

"Seems like she dropped her scarf."

"Yeah, that was it. Because the wind on the bridge was so strong, right?"

*So you knew.*

Haruka had said that she dropped it, not that it was blown away by the wind. She could have dropped it in the street and lost it, and indeed, that was a more likely place for her to take it off. In other words, Makoto had pretended he didn't know, even though he had heard about it from Aki. Maybe he had also heard that Haruka had been cold to her. Was he...intending to tell Haruka off for it?

*Whatever. This is boring.*

Haruka had no intention of continuing this conversation.

"I'm going on ahead."

"Okay."

Haruka left the changing room.



"My name is Matsuoka Rin. I came here from Sano SC. I have a girly name, but I'm definitely a guy! I hope we all get along."

That had certainly been easy enough to predict. At the very least, it wasn't anything to be surprised about. There weren't any swim clubs in the area besides this one. But no matter what Rin did, Haruka definitely wasn't going to get involved. Rin could do whatever he wanted. Haruka would politely excuse himself from caring.

"No way, the coincidences are just piling up, huh? When I transferred, I definitely didn't think we'd be in the same swim club, too!"

*This is so stupid that I can't even listen to him.*

Leaving the rest to Makoto, Haruka jumped into the pool.

Under the water, Haruka made a space with his fingertips, and then pushed himself forward: his arms, followed by his head, chest, stomach, and finally his legs. He was neither forcing his way through nor surrendering himself. He was being accepted by the water, and accepting the water in return, both acknowledging each other. Neither excluding the other, or trying to become one with the other. While being of different natures originally, they continued to have a relationship where neither negated the other. To Haruka, that was what swimming was.

While he was in the water, Haruka was freed from troublesome things. He could feel the waves in his heart becoming quiet and calm. Rin, Aki, the scarf, the wind - there was no way he could forget these things, but for at least a little while, he could leave them behind.

When he had finished swimming a thousand meters of crawl, Haruka raised his face from the water. Makoto was ready and waiting on the poolside, holding out his hand.

"Good job; you worked hard."

He hadn't swum hard enough to tire himself out. Actually, Makoto was the one who was out of breath. Maybe he had also just finished swimming a thousand meters. He had probably done it at full strength, too.



That was how he had always been. When it came to swimming, Makoto never knew how to hold back. He certainly never let himself just swim with the flow. Haruka had never asked, nor even thought about asking, why that was the case.

"Where's that guy?"

As Makoto pulled him up out of the water, Haruka asked about Rin.

"He's swimming. Look, over there."

Rin was in the farthest lane, repeating his strokes as if checking the texture of the water. Once Haruka had identified Rin, he began to walk away.

"They're doing short course over there, so let's go check our times."

Haruka didn't care about his times. He just wanted to get as far away from Rin as possible. He didn't want to get wrapped up in anything troublesome. And more than himself, he didn't want Makoto to get involved. If Makoto got involved, then sooner or later, without fail, Haruka would get dragged in, too. That much was guaranteed.

Without caring that Makoto was standing with his arms spread and an expression of surprise on his face, Haruka continued toward the short course pool.



When Rin looked up after swimming a relaxed thousand meters of crawl, a young boy was peering at him from above with big, round eyes like a small animal's. He was looking down at Rin unblinkingly, as if he was looking for water striders or crawfish.

"What?"

Rin stared back at him from below.

"Matsuoka-kun, are you Nanase-kun's friend?"

The boy watched him intently.

"I wouldn't say we're friends. I guess we're more like rivals."

"What do you mean, rivals? Are you bragging to make yourself look good?"

He still hadn't blinked even once.

"It means we race against each other."

As he spoke, Rin dropped his gaze and climbed up into the poolside. Looking somebody in the eyes that long made him feel like they were going to peer right into him.

"Between you and Nanase-kun, who's faster?"

"At fifty meters it's me, at one hundred it's Nanase, I guess."

When Rin stood up, the boy stood up, too.

*Geez, he's tiny, Rin thought. Maybe he's in about fourth grade?*

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you faster at fifty meters, and slower at one hundred meters? Ah, I got it! You can only swim fifty meters, right? I bet you don't know how to breathe properly, or something. Want me to teach you?"

"No thanks. I can definitely swim one hundred meters, and I know how to breathe, too."

"Heh heh. My best is five hundred meters. And you know what? In January, I'm going to be starting on the race course. My specialty is breast, but - ah, 'breast' means 'breaststroke'. I'm the only one in my class that can swim five hundred meters."

"Class...you mean, at school?"

"Yeah, fifth grade class three."

*Geez, I've gotten stuck with an unbelievable bragger.*

Rin pushed his goggles up and looked for Haruka and Makoto.

"Hey, Matsuoka-kun, what's your specialty?"

"Anything."

"Anything? You mean, even butterfly?"

Of the four main swimming strokes, butterfly was the last one to be learned.

*If he's only just starting the race course, maybe he hasn't swum it much yet.*

"Butterfly and backstroke and free and breaststroke. By the way, dog paddle is my most special specialty."



*Where did they disappear to?*

Haruka and Makoto were nowhere to be found.

"That's awesome. Matsuoka-kun, you can do medleys, too, right?"

"I can."

Rin had been doing individual medleys since third grade. It wasn't even worth bragging about. This was getting really annoying. He'd had just about enough of those big, round eyes, too.

"I'm Hazuki Nagisa. Hey, Matsuoka-kun, take a look at my butterfly. For some reason, I can't get it to go forward."

"Your elbows are crooked. You're not keeping them high enough. You're not using your hips."

Rin spotted Makoto. He was timing someone on the short course. That meant that it must be Haruka who was swimming.

"Heeey, you haven't even seen it yet, don't just say vague things!"

"Geez, you're loud. I don't have to see it, I can more or less..."

Nagisa was looking at him with teary eyes.

"Don't call me loud. Take an actual look."

He was looking straight at Rin, his eyes still watery. If he started crying here, it would cause problems.

"I-I get it, I'll take a look."

In a flash, Nagisa's whole face broke into a huge smile.

"Really? Then I'll just swim here, okay?"

Putting on his goggles, he jumped into the lane that Rin had just been swimming in.

*Well, first of all, he should relearn basic diving,* Rin thought.

That he needed to improve his butterfly went without saying. It was just as Rin had already pointed out. Nagisa had said he was swimming butterfly, but it felt more like another member of the insect family. Rather than "butterfly", he should change its

name to "grasshopper"<sup>3</sup>. In a way, it was almost like he'd invented an entirely new stroke.

Suddenly Rin felt a chill go through him.

*Could get stuck watching this every time? Until he learns to swim properly, am I going to keep getting clung to and dragged around by those huge, round eyes?*

He couldn't help but feel that this would be the case.

Caught by this nasty premonition, realizing that the chance of it coming true was nearly 100%, Rin watched, or rather, scrutinized Nagisa's "grasshopper."



"All right, that's enough for today. You've gotten a lot better, haven't you?"

Rin said, and in the water, Nagisa's face brightened.

"Really? I've gotten better?"

*Yeah, you've gotten better. At grasshopper stroke.*

"Hurry up and get out. I'll show you something cool."

"What, what is it?"

Nagisa climbed up onto the poolside, his eyes full of curiosity.

"It's this way."

Rin beckoned him over and headed toward the short-course pool at a jog.

"Where are you going, Matsuoka-kun?"

"Earlier, you were asking whether me or Nanase was faster."

"Yeah?"

"Well, now I'll show you."

Rin said, sounding amused.

---

<sup>3</sup> That is a joke that doesn't translate. "Butterfly" (the swimming stroke) gets called batta for short in Japanese. This also means "grasshopper", hence Rin's new name for Nagisa's stroke.



As they ran up to Makoto, he noticed Rin and turned to look over his shoulder at them.

"Ah, Matsuoka-kun."

He had a stopwatch in his hand. Swimming in the short-course lane in front of him was Haruka, who was gracefully practicing his crawl stroke.

"How many meters is that?"

"Um, he's at the fifty-meter turn, but..."

Haruka made his flip-turn and headed back. Rin adjusted his goggles, snapping the rubber strap as he went to stand on the starting block, and then jumped into the neighboring lane just like that. There was a splash as he tore through the water with a dolphin kick. As he broke the surface, he began his stroke. By that time, he was only half a body-length behind Haruka.

*You'd better not take it easy with your swimming. Come on, sink your teeth in!*

Rin was gaining fiercely on Haruka, and by the twenty-meter mark, they were evenly matched. They flip-turned simultaneously. Rin stretched. Surfaced from his dolphin kick. Began his stroke. He could feel Haruka's fingertips drawing level with his waist.

With about fifteen meters left, Haruka's swimming changed. His stroke didn't get faster, and he wasn't putting more power into it. Even so, Rin could tell.

He could feel it. That intense drive, like a mass of energy.

*Come on! Come on, come on. Keep it coming!*

Haruka was snapping at Rin's shoulder and tearing off his head. Five meters left.

*I'm tired. I'm wearing out, but like hell I'll give out now!*

Their heads were even. Then they touched the wall.

Raising his face from the water, Rin yelled to Makoto.

"Who was it?!"

Nagisa was by Makoto's side. The two of them simultaneously pointed at Haruka. The same Haruka who was lightly climbing up onto the poolside, not even out of breath. Rin seemed to take a bit longer to recover. He had taken a lot of damage from the pressure of being chased down by Haruka.

"So, what was Nanase's time for the hundred?"

Haruka, who had taken the stopwatch from Makoto, returned it to him. Then he started walking away.

Makoto looked from the stopwatch to Rin.

"He reset it."

Nagisa chased after Haruka as he left.

"Nanase-kun, that was amazing! You were so cool! Hey, hey, next time, teach me how to swim freestyle, too!"

As he listened to Nagisa's voice fading into the distance, Rin let his body sink underwater.

*He's really fast.*

Rin whispered into the water, unable to suppress his excitement.



Haruka hitched his bag up on his shoulder and stepped out of the changing room and into the lobby. The cool feeling of the floor under his feet reminded him that it was still winter. As he walked, he was thinking about what had just happened. Wondering why he had gotten so irritated.

When someone had caught up with him just before he hit the turn, he had known that it was Rin right away. They had swum against each other many times at meets. He could tell from the way the ripples in the water felt. Also, there was no one else in the club who would challenge him to a race like that. The instant he realized who it was, he had snapped and something had erupted inside him. At the idea that there was someone in front of him who could feel the water more than he did, his body had grown hot. The heat had flowed all through him. He hadn't even felt like trying to hold back.

Even after he had climbed up onto the poolside, he continued to smolder, unable to burn off all of his energy. When he thought what had happened inside him, he got irritated, and he didn't even feel like swimming anymore. If he swam, he felt like it would happen again. And when he thought that someone like Rin had thrown his emotions into disarray like that, he was disgusted with himself. Deeply regretting that he'd let himself be provoked and gotten so thoroughly carried away, Haruka left the pool.

Haruka stared absently at the wall of the break room, which was decorated with rows of photographs of former club members. They were group photos, taken at the end of every March. He had known that the room was decorated with those photos, but until just now, he hadn't given them much thought. There were two photographs of Haruka. He was standing at the edge of the group, looking bored.

Now that he was looking again, he realized that there were quite a lot of photos. The oldest was from more than twenty-three years ago, and compared to now, there were a lot fewer people. The boy in the middle was holding a trophy and laughing. On the medal around his neck, Haruka could make out the words "Eighteenth Tournament". It wasn't just that picture, either. No matter which picture he looked at, there were people holding trophies or medals, all of them smiling.

*Will I have to pose like that again this year?*

When he thought about that, Haruka felt a little fed up.

He stepped outside, and the wind suddenly beat against his cheeks.

*So the wind is still blowing?*

Making a face, he headed for the bike rack.

"Wow, the wind's really strong, huh?"

Makoto's voice came from behind Haruka.

*He's the kind of guy who just says whatever he's thinking.*

Haruka thought. Sometimes he even voiced Haruka's thoughts for him. He was meddlesome that way.

"Ah, that was a good swim!"

Rin came out of the club and headed towards Haruka and Makoto from the other direction, sounding like an old man soaking in a hot spring.

Seeing him, Makoto called out.

"Matsuoka-kun, the bike rack's over here!"

"Nah, I didn't come here on a bike."

"Well, then, do you want to ride on the back of mine? I'll take you home."

*There he goes again, saying unnecessary things. He should just leave him alone.*

Ignoring Makoto, Haruka kept walking.



"It's fine, I don't live that far away. See you tomorrow!"

Rin said, loud enough that Haruka could hear, too, and then started walking in the opposite direction from the bike rack.

Haruka and Makoto rode their bikes along the edge of the harbor and arrived on the bank of the Shiwasawa. This was the only road that crossed the Mutsuki Bridge. Absently, Haruka glanced down at the river's surface, but the scarf was nowhere to be seen.

*Maybe it sank, or maybe it floated all the way out to sea.*

Before they could start to cross the bridge, Rin came running up behind them, his breath white in the cold. His backpack was fixed on firmly over his training wear, and his white running shoes struck the ground rhythmically. He was completely prepared for running.

*He probably means to run to practice every day, not just today.*

Thinking on the inside, Haruka turned his eyes away from Rin. When Rin overtook them, Haruka pushed just a bit harder on his pedals.

He could hear Makoto's voice from behind him.

"How many kilometers is it to your house?"

"A little over three kilometers..."

Rin's voice was carried away by the wind.



The next morning, the wind was still blowing through the line of poplars. The sky is clearing up, so where is it blowing from? Haruka wondered, looking up at the clouds.

*Though I guess it's not as if it comes from the clouds.*

He reconsidered, pulling his jacket up over his neck.

In the morning, Haruka always went to school alone. Makoto had to walk his younger brother and sister to the stop for their bus to kindergarten, and always ended up barely making it in time. Also, he was always rushed on his way to school. Haruka couldn't accompany him like that.

The wind blew again, and Haruka grimaced. Though there were a number of children walking in lines along the road, the only sound was the strange creaking voices of the trembling line of poplars.

Haruka continued toward the school, disliking the straight, spacious road. He especially hated walking in groups with everyone during the winter. When he thought about being in those groups himself, sometimes he couldn't stand it. It reminded him of something he'd seen a long time ago. Though it had happened many years before, he could still remember it clearly. A freezing wind had been blowing then, too.



The sound of the staves carried by the white-robed people echoed in the silence over the harbor. There were about fifty people there in all. Keeping their eyes downcast, they continued to walk in silence. There were elderly people there, but there were children of about Haruka's own age among them, as well. Haruka's eyes unconsciously followed the children. His attention was drawn to a young girl, wearing the same white clothes as the adults, walking with her face in her hands.

*Is she crying?*

As he wondered this, lightly clenching his fist, the girl lifted her face and turned toward him. Her eyes met Haruka's, and she wiped at her tear-stained cheeks with her left arm. Then she glared fixedly at Haruka.

"Haru-chan, where are those people going?"

The younger Makoto asked, standing as if he were hiding in Haruka's shadow.

"I don't know."

"Then, what are they doing?"

*How should I know?*

Instead of replying, Haruka turned to look at Makoto. Makoto looked worried, his upturned eyebrows drawn together, and he was gripping the hem of Haruka's shirt. From somewhere in the crowd, the sound of someone weeping rose up, and Makoto's grip grew tighter.

"Makoto, are you scared?"

"I don't know. Are you, Haru-chan?"

Haruka wasn't scared. It was just that this eeriness that he couldn't understand was noisy in his chest, making him feel restless. He didn't know what the line of people meant, but there was no denying that something about it was frightening Makoto.

Haruka grabbed Makoto's hand, which had been clutching the hem of his shirt, and quickly ran far, as far as he could get, from the line of people.



"Good morning, Nanase-kun."

When someone called to him, Haruka turned suddenly, as if startled. It had taken him completely by surprise. When he saw that it was Aki, he worried a little bit about how his reaction had come across. But he only thought that for a moment before returning to his usual self.

"Hey."

It was a curt answer. That was normal, but even Haruka thought that his voice when he replied just now had sounded especially grouchy. Cheerful greetings were ill-suited to this place to begin with. It was that kind of road. But Aki, completely ignoring that, turned her usual cheerful smile on him.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. For making you worry like that."

*Is she talking about what happened on the bridge?*

He couldn't think of anything else.

*I don't particularly remember being worried, though.*

It was just that her unusually depressed face had stuck in the corner of his memory.

"What happened to your scarf?"

*No matter how you look at it, since it was dropped in the middle of that wide river, there was nothing to be done about it.*

After he asked, he thought, *I shouldn't have said that.*



There was no trace of yesterday's dark shadows in Aki's expression. She laughed clearly, like the blue sky in summer.

"It sank a little while after you left, Nanase-kun. After that, I was able to give up. I think if it had kept floating, I might have kept watching it forever."

She laughed again after she said it. Her smile didn't suit the winter sky or the road.

"What's wrong, Nanase-kun? Your face looks kind of red."

Aki had abruptly come over to peer into Haruka's face. When she tried to meet his eyes directly, Haruka shifted his gaze a bit farther away.

"It's nothing. It's normal."

"Are you sure you don't have a fever?"

Haruka instinctively pushed away Aki's hand as it reached for his cheek. Because of this, they were left face-to-face, and time stopped for a second. With her other hand, Aki was holding back the hand that Haruka had pushed away, and looking at Haruka in surprise.

"Ah...sorry."

Haruka was the one to apologize. If he didn't want to be touched, he should have moved his neck to avoid it, or lightly blocked her with his own hand. He shouldn't have pushed her hand away at all.

"Oh, no, I'm the one who should be sorry."

Their conversation broke there, as both of them began down the road toward the school once again. Silently, keeping their heads down, their faces screwed up against the intermittent gusts of strong wind...this was a much more appropriate attitude for walking down the poplar-lined street.



Their homeroom theme was "Creating Memories for Graduation." All of the classes had been brought together to contribute ideas, and then those ideas were narrowed down to just one. Once it had been decided that all of the graduating students would work on it together, there were many varied opinions, even just within Haruka's class.

Things that could be done quickly, things that were impossible to realize, laughable things, things that leaned heavily toward certain hobbies. Then, when it seemed that all of the ideas had just about run out, Aki's hand went up.

"Um, I've been thinking this for a while now, but the only flowers that bloom around this school are from the cherry tree, right? In the spring there will be lots of flowers, but right now it seems sort of lonely..."

Between the school building and the pool stood a large cherry tree. There was no other tree as imposing to be found in the area. It had an overwhelming presence that didn't let anything come near; the trees, the grass and the flowers all stayed away as if daunted by it.

"So I was thinking, what if we planted a flower bed around the cherry tree? I thought it would be wonderful if there were lots of bright-colored flowers blooming happily with the cherry tree in the spring."

Haruka felt a bit of reluctance. The cherry tree needed to be the tallest, biggest, most dignified, most secluded of them all. He didn't even want to imagine it being surrounded by a bunch of gaudy flowers.

"I'm in favor of planting a flower bed, too."

The one who spoke, advancing Aki's idea, was Makoto.

"I think it would be nice if we planted flowers that would bloom right around the time we all graduate."

Majority rule cannot always be called fairness. Regardless of their depth of feeling, each person is impartially given the right to a vote. Even so, if he could have expressed the depth of his feelings like Makoto and Aki had, and tried to reach an understanding with them, it might have been all right, but Haruka couldn't do that. Haruka was terrible at things like pressing his feelings onto others.

That was how it always went, and Aki's idea had general support; and so the class voted overwhelmingly in favor of the flower bed.



"Haru, are you okay?"

After homeroom, Makoto came to talk to him with a worried look on his face.

"What do you mean?"

"Your face is red. Do you have a fever?"

This morning, Aki had asked him the same thing. Haruka put the palm of his hand on the back of his neck.

"Not especially. I feel fine, but..."

It was nothing worth worrying other people with. Just as Haruka was starting to feel uncomfortable with the way Makoto was looking at him like a sick person to be worried about, Rin came over to them, speaking in a voice that was out of tune with the atmosphere.

"I wouldn't have thought you'd be the type to like romantic things like flowers and love, Tachibana."

Rin folded his arms and teased Makoto, having come to his own understanding of the situation.

"I was more surprised by your idea, Matsuoka-kun. Launching a satellite? Isn't that much more romantic?"

"Not launching one - having messages put into a satellite. About our dreams and friends and stuff."

"Yeah, you're a romantic after all, Matsuoka-kun."

"Well, that may be true. But you know, I was surprised that Nanase went with my idea. Actually, it kind of made me happy."

Makoto and Rin's voices were hurting Haruka's ears, but even yelling for them to be quiet seemed troublesome and not worth the effort.

*That might be a little bad.*

As Haruka had the thought, Rin noticed his condition.

*I wish he hadn't noticed.*

"Huh? Is Nanase not feeling well?"

Rin wasn't asking Haruka. He was asking Makoto.

"About that, I was wondering if he had a fever, but..."

As he spoke, Makoto peered into Haruka's face.



"I said I don't have a fever!"

Controlling himself was too much trouble. At Haruka's raised voice, several nearby people turned toward them. An awkward silence fell.

"...Sorry."

It was the same thing he'd said to Aki this morning. Haruka stood up from his seat and headed toward the classroom door. Even if it was just for a little while, he wanted to be free from everything about that place. Feeling Makoto's worried gaze on his back, Haruka left the classroom.



As he was riding the bike that he kept at the foot of the stone steps, Haruka's feet stopped unintentionally. This was the bike that he rode to swim practice every day.

*That guy...is he going to run again today?*

Rin floated through the corner of his mind. From here to Iwatobi SC was about two kilometers. That was much shorter than the distance Rin had to run.

Haruka had never done much in the way of dry land training. He didn't have much interest in disciplining his body. Feeling the water - that was what swimming meant to Haruka. He had never once swum for the sake of beating someone else. That was why he never worried about his times, or felt any need to train his body.

It was just that there might be someone who could swim faster than Haruka, and that might mean that he could feel the water more than Haruka could, and it was a fact that this left a small knot of worry in Haruka's heart. He didn't know how the water felt to Rin, but he could swim the fifty meter faster than Haruka, and up until about the seventy-meter mark of the one hundred meter, he'd been ahead of Haruka.

*He's running again today.*

That alone was enough reason for Haruka to run.

He had a fever. Even without Aki and Makoto telling him, he knew it. Until now, whenever he'd had a bit of a cold or a fever, it would clear up after he swam. He didn't need logic. Once he got into the water, he was healed. After he swam,

something as small as a cold would always be cured as if it had never been there at all.

That was why, from the beginning, Haruka had never planned to rest today. But if he went to practice today, he would end up meeting Rin. He would end up seeing Rin running. As he passed Rin on his bike, he would end up having to look away. And he would end up feeling irritated at himself for not running.

Haruka looked up at the stairs to Makoto's house just once. Makoto hadn't come out yet. Leaving his bike behind, he began to run the two kilometer distance at a light jog.



The wind was blowing on the Mutsuki Bridge again today. With the wind striking his cheeks, Haruka absently looked up at Mt. Myoujin.

It's not as if the wind comes from the mountains, either.

He thought again, and then turned forward and continued running.

His breath sprang white into the air. He started to sweat. It had been a while since he had run any long distances. But even though he hadn't sped up enough to warrant it, he was drenched in sweat. Even though there weren't any steep hills or staircases, his heartbeat was pounding through his whole body. Was it because of the fever that he had so quickly become unable to control his labored breathing? Even so, Haruka kept running, screwing up his face against the wind that blew in from the side.

Makoto hadn't caught up with him yet.

*I wonder if he's taking care of his goldfish again. Well, whatever...*

Haruka's vision was wavering oddly now and then, and by the time he finished crossing the bridge, he was aware that he probably wouldn't be able to run all the way to swim practice. He reached his limit as he was running along the bank of the river. His feet stopped; he put his hands on his knees and took deep breaths that shook his shoulders. Sweat dripped off of Haruka's downturned face, making a number of small blotches on the earth. If he could have, he would have liked to lie down sprawled out on the ground. The way that Rin had, on that day.

*Dammit, what am I doing, being all exhausted?!*

But even if he could muster up his fighting spirit, his chest still hurt, and his legs wouldn't move forward. He couldn't bear the thought of being seen like this by Makoto or Rin. Rather than having anyone worry or fuss over him, Haruka wished he could just disappear. He refused to be the kind of person people worried about. He was unusually impatient to catch his breath.

After a while, as Haruka's breathing was beginning to calm down, he suddenly realized that something white was appearing and disappearing on the surface of the river. Aki's scarf was caught in a place that looked like it could be reached from the shore under the embankment. Haruka had thought that it would have sunk or been carried out to sea long ago, but it looked as though it had been pushed back by the ebb and flow of the tides.

*If I think about wanting to reach it, it will drift to a place I can reach. If I think about wanting to reach it...*

There was the sound of brakes, and Haruka reflexively turned around. Aki got off her bicycle, a worried look on her face.

"What's wrong, Nanase-kun?"

Haruka stretched the muscles in his back and forcibly contained his ragged breathing. He meant to say *Nothing*, and continue running, but his voice wouldn't work. If he spoke, he felt like the breaths he was holding back would rush out all at once.

"Ah!"

Aki's gaze had gone past Haruka and landed on the river's surface. On the white scarf floating on the river's surface...

Haruka scolded himself internally, and then tried taking a deep breath. It seemed like he had calmed down a lot. He thought it would be all right for him to speak now.

"I'll go get it."

"You don't have to, it's too dangerous!"

*As if I'd get tired at a time like this. I just stopped for a minute because I saw Aki's scarf.*

Making excuses for himself, he turned his back on Aki.

Just as Haruka was about to step onto the riverbank, he had a sudden attack of dizziness. He barely had time to think *oh, crap*, before darkness covered his vision and he lost his sense of balance. He had thought that he could feel the grassy



ground solid under his feet, but now those feet were kicking through empty air and he was tumbling down the embankment. He couldn't tell up from down. It was his own body, but somehow, he couldn't figure out what it was doing. All he could hear was Aki's voice, crying out like the line of poplars trembling in the wind.

Haruka felt the chill of the water on the lower half of his body, and that was when he understood that he had fallen into the river. Gradually, his sense of sight returned. Half of his body was in the water. His right hand was gripping the dry grass on the riverbank. His left hand...was tangled in the once-white scarf that had now turned the color of tea.

*This sucks...what am I doing?*

That was as much as he could think clearly. Without healing Haruka's body or heart, the river water stole his body heat and brought his thoughts to a standstill.

In the space between dreams and reality, he thought that he could faintly hear Makoto's voice calling his name, and the sound of ambulance sirens.

"Haru, Haru!"

And then Haruka fell into a deep sleep.



He woke up because his head was hurting horribly. Before he could even wonder where he was, Makoto's voice reached his ears.

"Haru, are you awake? Haru!"

Haruka didn't even think of telling Makoto that his voice hurt his ears. He couldn't even object to being fussed over. Makoto's voice flowed over him naturally, just as it always did.

Haruka tried to focus his eyes, but it didn't work very well. His head still hurt. His body felt heavy. Even so, because he wanted to tell Makoto *I'm awake now, so don't worry*, he began trying to form words.

"Where...am I?"

"You're in the hospital."

"The hospital?"

The fluorescent lights are really bright.

He thought. When he tried to figure out why he might be sleeping in the hospital, it made his head hurt again.

"Haru, are you all right? Your mom will be coming soon, okay? We got in touch with her a little while ago.

Haruka was finally starting to be able to see Makoto's face clearly. When he did, he realized that there was another person behind Makoto. Rin was standing there silently, his face unusually serious. On a hanger beside him, something white was fluttering in the breeze from the air conditioner.

*Is it the curtain? No, it's thinner, a different kind of cloth... --the scarf!*

The moment he remembered that, his memories returned. He immediately tried to get up, and his whole body protested.

"Don't! You can't push yourself like that. You have a fever of forty degrees<sup>4</sup>."

Haruka wanted to know. After he had fallen in the river, what circumstances had brought him here? He wanted to know right now.

"Yazaki?"

Aki had been on the riverbank, and had probably seen the whole thing. But Aki was nowhere to be seen.

"If you're wondering what happened to Zaki-chan, I think she went home. But I'm sure she's worried about you right now."

"What happened to me?"

"Just as Matsuoka-kun and I were crossing the bridge, we heard Zaki-chan yelling. When we went to see what was wrong, you had fallen into the river."

After that, the two of them had hauled Haruka up onto the embankment together, while Aki had called the ambulance. Makoto and Rin had ridden in the ambulance, and Aki had called the swim club and Haruka's house. Even though she had looked as if she were about to cry, Aki had carried out the task given to her with a stout heart.

"So make sure you go and talk to Zaki-chan later, too, okay?"

---

<sup>4</sup> In Celsius.

On the bed, Haru nodded once. He wanted to ask Makoto to explain everything to him. Listening made his head hurt, but he intended to act unconcerned for as long as he could.

"After that, they told us that you had influenza, Haru."

*Something as stupid as that got me into this situation?*

Haruka thought, extremely annoyed.

"Well, I'm going to go call the doctor."

Makoto opened the door and left, and it suddenly became quiet inside the hospital room. All that could be heard was the noise of the air conditioning and Haruka's rough breathing. Haruka realized for the first time that he was out of breath.

Haruka looked at Rin. He was still standing silently, his gaze slanted down toward the floor. Next to him, the scarf fluttered.

"Matsuoka...thanks."

The words came out so honestly that Haruka even surprised himself.

Rin just gave a small nod, and didn't try to look up at Haruka. From then until the time that Makoto returned, the only sounds were of the air conditioner and Haruka's breathing.



Being exposed to the cold air outside made him remember just how warm it had been inside the hospital. As Rin walked, he put his numb hands into the pockets of his jacket. His legs felt strangely heavy. He couldn't breathe very well. But he had finally caught up to Makoto, who was walking in front of him. He tried calling out to Makoto.

"...Tachibana."

It felt like it had been forever since Rin had used his voice. At the very least, this was the first time he had since they'd come to the hospital.

"What is it, Matsuoka-kun?"

"I..."



"Hm?"

Rin hesitated. Without pressing him, Makoto waited for what Rin would say next. In the interval, Makoto continued walking, without letting his feet stop. Slowly, as though he was waiting for Rin to catch up to him.

"I was seriously scared."

Those were Rin's honest feelings. Even now, the feeling of being scared continued. It made him feel like all of his insides were moving wrong, and they wouldn't stop. He had thought that his lungs would draw breath, and that his heart would beat, even if he didn't put any particular thought into it. But right now, he felt like if he didn't take deep breaths, all of his functions would just stop.

"I was so scared that I couldn't even figure out what to do."

Makoto turned and gave him a smile. Raising his upturned eyebrows, he smoothly kept walking while facing backwards.

"It's going to be okay. They said it's just ordinary influenza. It hasn't turned into pneumonia, so he'll get better soon."

Rin thought that Haruka's situation was very serious. It was true that when he had seen that Haruka had fallen into the river, he had panicked. He had been hasty, and had lost his presence of mind. But what was making Rin feel scared right now wasn't any of those things.

"No, not about Nanase. About you, Tachibana."

"What?"

Makoto stopped walking. He was meeting Rin's honest gaze straight-on, but he was still smiling. He almost looked as if he wanted to ask whether Rin was joking.

"When we pulled Nanase out of the river, you were shaking, weren't you?"

"Was I? It feels like I was dreaming, so I can't remember very well."

Makoto turned to face forward and started walking again.

Rin watched Makoto's back, thinking.

*He was definitely shaking back then.*

Though he had been able to give precise orders to Rin and Aki, Makoto had been shaking so hard that there was no way to miss it. His hands, his legs and his face - they weren't shaking from the cold, but because he was afraid of something. Even

while they were riding in the ambulance, Makoto had gripped the hem of Haruka's shirt, shaking and calling Haruka's name the whole time.

Rin had never seen anyone that terrified by something before. The sight had stuck deep in his heart, and now his body wouldn't work the way he thought it should.

Without saying anything more, Rin kept walking behind Makoto. If Makoto said that he didn't remember, then Rin wouldn't interfere. He didn't want to forcibly pry into things that Makoto didn't want to talk about. That was why he didn't intend to enquire any further.

*Even if I did ask, it wouldn't make much difference,* he thought.

While they were waiting at the bus stop, and after they got on the bus, as well, the two of them stayed silent and didn't meet each other's gazes.

Rin pushed the bell at his stop and stood up to get off the bus two stops before Makoto did.

"See you."

"Yeah."

For just that one second, Rin looked at Makoto's face. He looked the same as always. His upturned eyebrows were raised, and he was smiling just as he always did. Maybe I was worrying too much. Rin got off the bus, and suddenly all the strength went out of his body. He took a deep breath of the evening air, and stared after the bus as it drove off into the red sunset.



As soon as Rin left the bus, Makoto's hands started shaking. Something that had been stretched to breaking inside him had suddenly snapped, and his hands were shaking so hard that he couldn't do anything to stop it. Before long, it circulated through his body, and his legs, his chest, and his face trembled, and even his teeth were chattering. He held himself tightly with both arms. No matter how hard he squeezed, the trembling wouldn't stop. No matter how firmly he clenched his teeth, his lips shook. Soundlessly, tears were pouring down his cheeks, and Makoto couldn't do a thing about it.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Free*

It was four days later that Haruka returned to swim practice. He walked into the locker room, out of breath but with the same expression as always.

Makoto was already changing.

"Haru....."

"Hey."

"Don't 'hey' me! What's going on? Are you better already?"

"I'm fine."

Haruka muttered, looking displeased at Makoto's worried expression.

"You're not fine. You're so out of breath; are you sure you don't still have a fever?"

Haruka waved him off like an annoyance and opened the door of his locker. Makoto raised his voice, sounding irritated.

"Haru!"

"I ran here."

"From where?"

"My house, obviously."

Haruka said, tossing his bag into his locker.

"Hey, Haru, you weren't at school today, were you?"

"I felt better this afternoon."

Haruka answered as if the question was bothersome, and started to get undressed. As if to say *I don't want to look at your worried face anymore*, Haruka continued to change in silence.

"Haru, what are you going to do if your fever comes back?"

"Makoto!"

Haruka's firm tone of voice and the clang of the locker shutting combined to drown out Makoto's words.



"...W-what?"

Haruka started walking, putting his left hand on Makoto's shoulder as he passed by.

"Thank you."

Leaving him with those words, Haruka exited the locker room.

Makoto suddenly felt a little weak. His jaw went slack at the unexpected words, and unconsciously, he raised his upturned eyebrows. Somehow, his feelings of worry over Haruka disappeared completely.



Haruka tried to swim the thousand meter crawl just as he always did. His breathing didn't get nearly as labored while he was in the water as it had while he was running. On the contrary, he felt as though he was being healed. For Haruka, this is how the water always was.

It was a lie that he'd felt better this afternoon. The truth was that he'd just started to feel better right now. School wouldn't heal his body or his heart, and so he had stayed home. As Haruka felt his strength returning in the water, he gradually increased his speed.

Haruka cut through the water in a glossy spray of foam, and when he lifted his face from the water, a single hand was held out to him. It was a more slender and delicate hand than Makoto's.

*It looks kind of like it would break if I grabbed it.*

He thought, hesitating for a second. He took off his goggles and looked up, his eyes narrowed.

"Welcome back. I'm glad you got better so soon."

With a smile like a blooming sunflower, Aki was looking down at him. It was the hand that Haruka had shoved away that day under the line of poplars. He took the offered hand and pulled himself up onto the poolside.

"Thanks."

"Sure."

Tilting his head to the right to get out the water that had gotten into his ears, Haruka asked quietly,

"Your scarf..."

Just that short phrase escaped from his mouth.

Aki's sunflower smile clouded over just a little.

"Yeah...?"

"I was thinking maybe you wouldn't want it anymore after it got like that, but..."

Even after it had been washed, the newly-light-brown scarf had not returned to its original whiteness, but Haruka had entrusted it to Makoto anyway, leaving the task of returning it to Aki to him.

"Yeah, I got it back from Tachibana-kun."

Aki hung her head. Haruka wondered if she thought it was her fault that he had fallen into the river.

"Don't drop it anymore."

"I'm sorry."

*Don't apologize. I'm the one who should be apologizing.*

"I'm sorry for the trouble I caused."

With Haruka's words, Aki's expression cleared. Her sunflower smile returned.

"Oh, no, not at all!" Aki shook her head slightly.

With just that short conversation, Haruka understood just how worried Aki had been.

Someone had been calling out to Aki for a little while now.

"Zaki! Relay practice is about to start!"

"Okay!"

After she replied, she waved to Haruka.

"See you."

"Yeah."

Aki ran off, a smile still on her face. Rin came up to meet Haruka, passing Aki on the way.

"Nanase, we've got relay practice, too."

*Relays? Why do I have to practice for that?*

As Haruka thought this, Makoto came running over as though chasing after Rin.

"No way. You can't push yourself any more today, Haru."

Makoto had gone right past worry and straight into acting like he was Haruka's guardian.

If Makoto was going to worry about him that much, Haruka didn't care if it was a relay or whatever, he would rather be in the water.

"What kind of relay? I only swim free."

Without looking at Makoto, he directed the question to Rin.

"It's freestyle."

"Haru."

Thinking annoyed thoughts about Makoto's worry, Haruka walked by right in front of him.

"Haru!"

As he called out to Haruka's back one more time, Makoto's voice was drowned out by the sound of a whistle being blown.

During relay practice, special emphasis was placed on diving. They used the twenty-five meter short-course, lining up on both sides of the pool, and after they swam they would line up once again. They repeated this practice until the time was up.

For relays, you could say that the biggest difference in times came from the starts and the relay tags. From the start, the act of swimming was one where, as you increased your propulsive force, that in itself would increase the water's resistance. In other words, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that making the best possible use of your start and kicking power was a key point. Because of this, you needed to be very aware of the angle of your dive and the way you held your body underwater, and for that, you needed to practice.

In a freestyle relay, there were four dives. Freestyle technically meant that swimmers could use whatever stroke they wanted, but since people usually chose the front



crawl, "freestyle" and "crawl" had basically become synonymous. And so, this practice was also using the crawl.

Haruka leapt nimbly into the pool and created an opening in the water. He slid his body forward, cutting through the water with an agile stroke, and touched the surface of the opposite wall. Over Haruka's head, Rin dove into the water. He wasn't any taller than Haruka, but Rin had more power in his legs than either Haruka or Makoto. The reason that he could swim so recklessly fast in short-course was also because the strength of his kick was a powerful weapon.

Haruka thought about this as he climbed up onto the poolside. The same hundred meter race had three flip-turns in short-course, but only one in long-course. Therefore, in Rin's case, short-course gave him an overwhelming advantage. That was also the reason that he'd been ahead of Haruka until about the seventy-meter mark at the meet. It was also the reason that Haruka would keep running.

Haruka wasn't going to deny that there was someone who could swim faster than him. But he wasn't going to acknowledge it so easily, either. It wasn't that he wanted to win, or that he hated losing; it was just that he couldn't simply accept that there was someone who could feel the water more than he could.

If he was asked whether running would make him able to jump farther, Haruka would answer honestly that he didn't know. However, there was someone who could jump farther than he could, and if that person ran, then that was enough reason for him to run, as well.

Haruka watched Rin swim while he thought about this. Makoto was standing in front of him. With his cap on his head and his goggles pulled down, he didn't look like a grade-schooler at all. His shoulders were broad and his chest was wide. Though he wasn't that muscular, he still looked intimidating as he stood on the starting block.

Rin touched the wall, and Makoto dove in with a huge splash. He plunged forcefully through the water, putting all his strength into his stroke. Even though he wasn't being timed, he was going all-out. That was how Makoto always was. The same Makoto as ever, swimming just the same as always.

That same Makoto, with only a few meters left until the goal, abruptly stopped swimming.

*Did he swallow some water?*

Haruka wondered, but it didn't look like that was it. Makoto's legs didn't seem to have frozen up, either. He was just treading water, gulping in huge breaths of air as if he was in pain.

Rin, who had just climbed out of the pool, jumped back in again and swam over to Makoto.

"What's the matter, Tachibana?"

Makoto pushed his goggles up and gave a smile from under his upturned eyebrows.

"Sorry, I'm fine. Looks like I'm just a little out of shape."

Feeling like that smile was going to turn to tears any second, Haruka turned his eyes away from Makoto. Then, without looking back, he began walking to the shower room.



When each class's ideas for the graduating students' project had been brought together and compared, in the end, Aki's plan was accepted. It was officially decided that they would plant a flower bed around the cherry tree. Once it had been decided, preparations were made rapidly, and in the blink of an eye, plans for the project were put together. Before many days had passed, a large amount of clay was brought to their classroom, and after school, the classroom would look a bit like a brick-making workshop. In the wide space that was made by gathering all the desks at the back of the room, a blue tarpaulin was spread out, and the clay was piled into mountains on top of it. The clay wasn't red anymore, but apparently when it was baked, the iron inside of it would oxidize, and it would turn red again.

The work began with kneading the clay. Each person would take a part of the divided clay to their own space, and then, in order to get all the air out from inside the clay, would diligently put their weight into kneading it thoroughly. This process had to be done carefully, or the clay could crack while it was being baked.

Haruka was trying not to think about the fact that these bricks were going to end up around the cherry tree, and was concentrating on it as just another art project.

"So, Nanase."

While Haruka had been kneading his clay, Rin had come over to talk to him. Without answering, Haruka raised only his eyes.

"I was wondering about the next meet. Wanna swim a medley relay?"

The next meet was after the graduation ceremony, near the end of March. Every year, all the clubs in the city would gather in one building and perform magnificently. It was also at one of these meets that they had met Rin.

Since they had entered sixth grade, Haruka and Makoto had gone to almost every meet. The events were all separated by age and sex, so there were three or four races that either of them could enter, but Haruka never entered anything but freestyle events. He had won three times in freestyle events. Makoto entered both freestyle and breaststroke events, and had the experience of winning twice in breaststroke races.

"I won't swim anything but free."

Haruka said, dropping his eyes back to his clay.

"Geez, you're obsessive, Nanase. It's fine, you can be our freestyle specialist. Right, Tachibana?"

Makoto's hands stopped moving as he was suddenly brought into the conversation.

"If we're doing a medley relay, what are we going to do about the butterfly leg? Wouldn't it be better to do a freestyle relay?"

In order to swim a medley relay, they would need four team members, one each to swim backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly and freestyle. But there was no one in their age group at Iwatobi SC who could swim butterfly quickly.

Rin sounded a bit surprised by Makoto's words.

"We'll be fine in a medley. I'll swim butterfly. Tachibana, you can swim breaststroke, and then all we need is someone for backstroke, right? There's nobody that really stands out, but as long as he can swim normally, the rest of us can manage something. Let's look carefully for someone decent at backstroke."

Makoto, perhaps overwhelmed by Rin's pushiness, went back to kneading his clay without replying. In Makoto's place, Haruka stopped moving his hands.

"All I said was that I only swim free; don't just go ahead and keep planning out the relay."

He spoke in a quiet tone, but did his best to put his strength of will into it.

Rin sighed into his clay as if to say 'children who don't listen will burn their hands.' However, the strength of will in his voice was just as strong as Haruka's.

"That's why I said it's fine for you to do free, didn't I, Nanase!"



The end of Rin's sentence had gotten too loud. After he said it, he snapped his mouth shut, but it was too late. Their classmates, scattered here and there across the blue tarpaulin, had all turned their gazes to him. Makoto had stopped kneading his clay to look at Rin, too.

Whatever Rin was thinking, he suddenly stood up. In any case, with everyone's attention on him, he had to cover for himself.

"S-so, I was saying, let's write messages on the bricks. Words that we like, and stuff. Let's write down things that stick in our memories as we please. Freely, right?"

Just as he was thinking *it's too late even if I play the earnest graduating student now*, Aki stood up.

"That's a nice idea, isn't it?"

Aki's brief comment changed the class's mood. Everyone began to talk excitedly about what kind of message they should write, and the class became lively once more.

Rin's shoulders slumped and he let out a short breath. Haruka and Makoto were continuing to knead their clay as if nothing had happened. Rin sat down and went back to kneading his own clay in silence.

The day ended on that note, without the subject of the relay coming up again.



Countless strings of slender clouds flowed over the top of Mt. Myoujin.

*I wonder if the wind is blowing on Mutsuki Bridge again today.*

As Haruka was thinking this, he glanced at his wristwatch. Compared to his first time, he'd come a little farther. It wasn't as if he had any specific landmarks, or anyone to compete against. Even so, he cared about his time for some reason. If it could be called a challenge, then perhaps he was competing against the Haruka of yesterday. Trying to surpass his own limits and step foot into the new world beyond them...maybe it was something like that.

*It's not like the water; there's nothing healing about this at all.*

He thought. But even though he thought so, while he was running, he sometimes felt as though he was being set free. It was just that on land, he could run so far. Even as he was considering this point, he still felt that there was a large difference between running and swimming. But while he was running like this, he could almost come to feel as though the two things held the same meaning.

While Haruka was thinking vaguely about this, around the time he was approaching the Mutsuki Bridge, another set of footsteps sounded alongside his own.

"Nanase-kun, good morning!"

When someone called out to him, Haruka turned to look, and Hazuki Nagisa fell into step beside him.

"Hey."

Haruka mumbled quietly. All he had in common with Nagisa was that they went to the same swim club, and that they both had girly names. Nagisa was one year below Haruka, in fifth grade.

Haruka couldn't imagine why Nagisa was running. Then he started wondering why Nagisa would be running with such a happy look on his face.

"Nanase-kun, you run every day lately, huh?"

His sugary voice stuck in Haruka's ears.

"A little."

Haruka thought his blunt answer would cut off the conversation. There was no way he could avoid Nagisa completely, but while he was running, Haruka didn't want to think about other things. He didn't want any part of his heart to be swayed by things outside of running. He felt as though something that was supposed to set him free was having the door forcibly shut on it again.

"Me, too..."

Because Nagisa was running out of breath, his voice ran out, too.

"I was thinking that I'd run too, starting today, but is it okay if I run with you?"

Haruka didn't have a reason to refuse.

"Sure, whatever."

"Really? Awesome!"

"But if you can't keep up, I'm not waiting."

"Okay."

Haruka had no intention of carrying on the conversation with Nagisa. He sped up before they reached the bridge. Nagisa's sigh faded behind him, and he returned to his private world.



Rin's nasty premonition was coming true just as he had known that it would. When he lifted his face after he had finished swimming a thousand meters of butterfly, those big, round eyes were peering at him from above. Just as they had every day since the first.

"What?"

He already knew what Nagisa wanted, but he ventured the question anyway.

"You can actually swim butterfly, huh?"

"Yeah, I can. So?"

"You're pretty good, huh?"

*But not as good as your "grasshopper."*

"You're going to swim, right? I'll take a look."

Rin quickly climbed up onto the poolside. He'd already given up his useless resistance.

"Um, hey, I'm gonna take a a little break from butterfly."

*I guess he's gotten bored already. He can't expect to improve at all at this rate.*

"Well, then, I guess I'm useless, aren't I?"

"No, that's not what I meant! Um, Matsuoka-kun, are you going to swim at the next meet?"

"Yeah, hopefully."

Rin spotted Aki. She was standing next to the lane at the far edge of the pool. Was it Haruka who was swimming there?

"What are you swimming?"

"A medley relay."

It was Haruka. He slipped through the water with all the grace of a shorebird soaring through the sky. Someone able to swim like that couldn't be anyone but Haruka.

"Is Nanase-kun going to swim with you?"

"They haven't decided yet, but I talked to Nanase and Tachibana about it."

Was Aki intending to wait until Haruka was done swimming? Just after Rin wondered that, all of a sudden, Aki left the side of the lane. But even as she was leaving, from time to time, she would look back at Haruka.

"One, two, three. Who's your last person?"

"No one, yet."

Just as Rin lost sight of Aki in the crowd of people, Haruka climbed up onto the poolside.

"Well, then, let me join! I'm fast at breaststroke."

Nagisa made his big, round eyes sparkle.

"No way."

Rin wondered if Aki was being asked to do too many things.

*Well, as long as she doesn't feel over-burdened, I guess it's okay...*

"Why not?"

"A guy who gives up on practicing butterfly halfway through can't be very fast, can he?"

"You're wrong, I didn't give up, I'm taking a break!"

"Well, why are you taking a break, then?"

"Because I'm going to swim breaststroke in your relay, so I'm practicing that instead."

"What? You're doing this way out of order!"

"Come on, let me join your team!"



"Impossible things are impossible!"

Because there was no end in sight, Rin began to walk away, closing the conversation. Nagisa's "Stingy!" bounced off his back as he hurried away from the place.



"What did you write on your brick?"

Aki had come over and plunked herself down next to Haruka, who was sitting on a bench after taking a swim.

"Free."

It was a blunt answer, giving only the bare minimum of a reply.

"That's like you, Nanase-kun. That could be taken to mean either 'living freely' or 'the common name of freestyle', right?"

It didn't have any such deep meaning. Haruka had told Rin that he only swam free, so he'd written it in a fit of pique. He'd answered because Aki had asked him, but he didn't intend to make his reply pretty and polite for her. More importantly, Haruka wanted to ask if Aki had come over specifically to ask him that, or whether she had some other business with him.

Almost as if she understood what Haruka was feeling, Aki took a small breath and began to speak.

"Um, Nanase-kun..."

After she spoke, Aki's words trailed off.

Haruka thought that was unlike her.

"What?"

He asked, trying to prompt her to continue.

At Haruka's prodding, Aki let a small smile show, and her mouth began to move again.

"You know, I'm going to swim a medley relay. With Miki and Maki and Yuki, the four of us. It's kinda funny, isn't it? If you just looked at our names, we'd almost seem like sisters."

As she said this, Aki gave a small laugh.

Haruka wondered if she'd swallowed the words she had meant to say.

*Whatever, it doesn't matter.*

He thought, and gave a vague answer.

"Almost, I guess."

Makoto, who had just finished swimming, was climbing up onto the poolside.

*Just in time for a substitution.*

Haruka could take over the lane from Makoto, and Makoto could take over being Aki's conversation partner from Haruka. Haruka stood and began to walk over to the starting block.

"Nanase-kun!"

Aki had stood up and called out to stop Haruka. He stopped walking, but didn't give any reply. Aki dragged her voice out from the depths of her throat, as if she had come to an important decision.

"I think you should swim the relay."

Without changing the direction he was facing, Haruka turned his neck to look over his shoulder at Aki.

"Why?"

"Well, because you're the fastest of the sixth-graders, aren't you, Nanase-kun?"

"At fifty meters, Matsuoka's faster."

Haruka returned his gaze to the front and began walking again. He walked past Makoto, who was still dripping water, and went straight to the starting blocks and jumped into the pool. Aki's gaze was cut off, and Haruka was once again released from his bonds under the water.



"Hey, Haru. Did you run here again today?"

Makoto asked, as they were drying off in the locker room.

Haruka answered almost in a whisper, conscious of Rin getting dressed behind him.

"I ran here, but..."

Haruka expected Rin to say something, but what he heard instead was Nagisa's voice.

"I started running today, too! Nanase-kun said it was okay if I ran with him."

"What?"

Rin spoke up in a jeering voice, taking a long, hard look at Haruka. Rin looked like he was trying to fit this in with his image of Haruka, and was wondering if he'd misjudged him.

"Only if he can keep up with me."

Once Haruka had said this, Rin started grinning again. Haruka started to remember his simple irritation.

Makoto delivered the final blow to Haruka's feelings.

"Maybe I should run, too."

Makoto said it as if he was joking, but Haruka knew that it wasn't a joke. He had wondered if Makoto was going to suggest it ever since Makoto had asked whether Haruka had run here.

Haruka felt unreasonably irritated yet again, because he didn't have a reason to say no.

"I'm telling you now, I won't wait."

"That's fine, I'm not that slow."

"No, I mean you leave too late."

"Ah, that's what you meant."

A small shadow passed over Makoto's eyes, but in the short time it took Haruka to wonder if he was seeing things, it had disappeared, and Makoto became cheerful again.

"It'll be okay, I'll make sure I start leaving earlier from tomorrow on."

*So what were you doing up until today?*

Haruka was about to ask, but Nagisa barreled on ahead.

"Can I run home with you, too?"

Haruka took his bag out of his locker and shut the door.

"Only if you get changed fast."

As he said this, he started walking quickly out of the locker room.

"Aw, wait up!"

Still putting on his other sock, Nagisa snatched his bag out of his locker and chased after Haruka. He looked so funny that Rin and Makoto had to laugh for a while.

When they had finally finished laughing, it felt as though the temperature in the now-quiet changing room had suddenly dropped. Makoto took his bag out of his locker and waved lightly at Rin.

"I guess I should head home, too."

"Tachibana."

Makoto, who had been about to step out of the room, stopped. When he looked back, Rin had an unusually serious look on his face.

"What is it?"

"About the relay, what do you think?"

"What do I think...? Well, I don't mind being in it, but..."

It was troubling for Makoto to be asked what he thought. There was no way he could give any other answer. Without looking any happier, Rin nodded a few times. It seemed like that hadn't been the answer he was looking for.

"Will Nanase swim in the relay?"

*Could you please ask him to swim?* is what Makoto heard. It looked like the one Rin was worried about was Haruka.



"Even if I asked him, I think it would end up the same way."

"Aw, don't say that!"

"Well, I guess I could try talking to him..."

"I'm counting on you."

Being looked at with eyes that said *you're the only one I can count on for this*, Makoto felt like he was under a little pressure. "Well, then, see you later."

"Yeah."

Makoto left the changing room and jogged out to the lobby. However, Haruka was nowhere to be seen. What Rin had asked of him wasn't something Makoto had to do right away, but he also didn't want to have to worry about it for too long. That's all it was. He didn't intend to persuade Haruka, either.

*If Haruka doesn't want to do it, then I don't care.*

Makoto thought.

*There's no reason for me to be hung up on the medley relay.*

Haruka was free to choose to swim whatever he wanted.

Makoto unlocked his bike with an echoing clank. He looked over at the place where Haruka always parked his bike. Today, a different bike was parked there. Without Haruka, the bike rack felt terribly lifeless and cold.

*Starting tomorrow, I'll run.*

In his heart, Makoto whispered his easy words from the locker room once more. Then he climbed onto his bike and began to pedal.

He caught up to Nagisa before the Mutsuki Bridge. Up ahead, Haruka was already running across.

"Fight, Nagisa!"

Makoto called, and Nagisa looked up at him, his breath coming out in white puffs as he panted. Nagisa would be doing well if he could finish at that pace, but Haruka was leaving him behind. Makoto felt too bad for Nagisa to pass him by, as well. He slowed down to keep pace with Nagisa.

"Keep it up, Nagisa!"

Makoto would have another chance to talk to Haruka tomorrow. There was no particular need to hurry. And so Makoto crossed the Mutsuki Bridge, cheering Nagisa on when he stumbled in the wind.



When Makoto got home, he immediately went to get a trowel and began to dig in the corner of the garden. It didn't even take him a minute to finish his work. After that, he opened the front door and turned on the lights.

On top of the shoe shelf, where he had left it, was the goldfish bowl. There were two goldfish floating on the surface of the water. They weren't swimming or moving their gills, they were just floating silently. The surface of their skin was covered in white flecks, and you could tell at a glance that they had been sick.

Every day when he got home from school, Makoto would clean out the fishbowl and put medicine in the water to treat them, but today when he got home, the two fish had been floating.

Makoto put his hand gently into the fishbowl. A lukewarm sensation swirled around his fingertips. As if it was a stagnant pond, he couldn't feel any pulse of life at all. He scooped the lifelessly floating goldfish into his hand. Without so much as flipping a fin, they lay still in Makoto's palm.

He carried the goldfish into the corner of the garden and placed them into the hole he had dug moments ago. He piled soil over them, and with just that, the ceremony was over.

*They had such small lives, over just like that.*

He thought, and something deep inside his chest cracked and hurt.

"I bet you wanted to swim some more, didn't you?"

Still holding the trowel, Makoto stood up. But even standing, he didn't take his eyes off the patch of dirt.

"I'm sorry."

Tossing the trowel aside, Makoto ran back to the entryway and cut the power to the pump. There was only quiet, dark, meaningless water in the bowl now.

*It's almost like the water that nearly swallowed Haruka that time.*

He thought, and his hands began to tremble again.

Makoto ran out of his house, hurrying down the front steps and continuing out onto the stone steps that led to the shrine. Haruka's house was close by. Makoto needed to see him right now.

*Tomorrow is no good. I'm going to see him now.*

If he didn't go, Makoto felt like he wouldn't be able to stay himself.

*I want to see Haruka.*

"Makoto."

As Makoto was about to start climbing the stone steps into the lowering evening, someone called out to stop him. Makoto's heart pounded hard, and his feet stopped moving.

Haruka's voice... He raised his gaze slowly, as if it was climbing the stone stairs one step at a time. The single torii was illuminated by the setting sun, making the shadows stand out darkly against it. And, standing under that torii was...Haruka.





*Was he waiting for me?*

As soon as he had raised the question in his heart, Makoto denied it. No way. He knew it was impossible, but there was still a part of him that thought so. His feet began moving on their own. Toward Haruka...

Makoto began to climb the stone steps, looking at Haruka. He didn't move his gaze. He didn't take his eyes off Haruka. As though he was being pulled along, Makoto climbed all the way up to the single torii, until he was close enough that, if he reached out, he could touch Haruka.

"Haru...have you been here the whole time?"

"Yeah."

Haruka mumbled, his face still expressionless.

"Did you know I was going to come out here?"

Even though he knew it was impossible, Makoto couldn't stop himself from asking.

"Nope."

"Then, why..." *are you standing in a place like this?*

"Watching the sunset."

Makoto turned his eyes in the direction that Haruka was gazing. He saw the red setting sun, weaving through the maples and elms from within the thin clouds, about to sink beneath the horizon. Because the sunset was shrouded in clouds, the sun had lost its usual brilliance, and its outline could be clearly seen, about the same size as the moon. Makoto thought it was pretty, but the sight wasn't unusual enough to be that fascinating.

*Maybe he was waiting for me, after all.*

Haruka had said that it wasn't the case, but Makoto wanted to believe it. Believing it made him feel as though the pain that throbbed deep in his chest was calming down.

"Did you need me for something?"

Haruka's face was lit by the setting sun, reflecting the red light.

"Yeah, but I guess seeing your face took care of it."

"The heck does that mean?"

Haruka showed a flash of teeth as he gave a small smile.

"It's weird, huh?"

Makoto raised his upturned eyebrows and laughed. Come to think of it, he felt like it had been a while since he and Haruka had talked, just the two of them. These days, it seemed like wherever they went, Rin was with them, too.

Suddenly, Haruka looked Makoto straight in the eyes. The evening sun glowed in his pupils, and Makoto felt as though he could see straight through Haruka's heart.

"Makoto."

"What is it?"

"Are you afraid of water?"

Makoto's heart pounded. His palms were sweaty. His throat was dry, and his chest felt tight. He felt like there wasn't enough oxygen in the air around him. Makoto tried to pretend that he was calm, but he couldn't force his breathing to stop being ragged.

Makoto looked into Haruka's eyes. He realized that the one whose heart was being seen through was him. That was how it had always been, since they were children. For someone who never talked about himself, Haruka certainly knew everything about Makoto. He made sure he knew everything. And then, he did Makoto the favor of pretending that he didn't know. Makoto's heart was open. There was no meaning in keeping it closed anymore.

Without pestering him or pressing the question, Haruka simply asked quietly, in his usual tone of voice.

"This whole time?"

Makoto nodded without speaking. It had nothing to do with whether the water was frightening, or whether he was able to swim or not. No matter how fast he swam, there was something hidden in the water that he couldn't escape from. Even if it looked like it was sleeping, it could wake up at any time and come to attack him. Fear of this hidden thing, fear of the shadows, all of these frightened feelings lived in Makoto's heart.

Haruka asked another short question.

"Why?"

Makoto didn't mind being asked by Haruka. Actually, he even felt like he wanted Haruka to know. Maybe he had even been waiting for Haruka to ask him. On the other hand, Makoto felt ashamed of how weak he was. It wasn't that he wanted to hide anything; it was just that he had been keeping this locked away deep in his heart for a long time.

"When we were little, the two of us saw a bunch of people in white clothes walking in lines, right? Do you remember?"

Haruka gave a small nod. The face of the girl who had turned to look at them floated across Makoto's mind, and at that moment, he thought Haruka was remembering it, too.

"Apparently a big fishing boat had sunk. A really big fishing boat, with dozens of people on board. It was only about three kilometers out of the harbor, in the open sea."

It had been a few years after seeing the line of people that Makoto had heard what had happened.

Haruka turned his eyes toward the ocean, and Makoto looked at the ocean, too. The wind blew as if it were carrying the setting sun.

"We swim three kilometers safely every day. Why would fishermen drown in a place like that?"

The reason they couldn't swim such a short distance must be hiding in the sea. Even if they looked for it, they certainly wouldn't find it. It wasn't something that could be seen with your eyes, anyway. Makoto couldn't think of any other explanation.

"Whenever I get into the pool, I stop being calm. Instead of swimming, I feel like I'm running away from something. Even though I'm not in the ocean, and even when my feet can touch the bottom just fine. ...I'm always running from the water."

Haruka was listening without saying anything. The sun was sinking below the horizon, and the edges of the sky were starting to grow dark. Still facing toward the ocean, Makoto lowered his eyes. Then he slowly raised his gaze back to Haruka.

"When you fell in the river, Haru, I was so scared I was shaking. Even when I tried to make it stop, I just kept shaking on the inside. My hands and my legs and all of me was shaking so hard that I couldn't stop it."

Makoto had thought that whatever was hidden in the water had tried to take Haruka away with it. He had thought that Haruka was going to be gone. The idea

that this terrible image painted inside his head might become real swooped down on him. All emotions other than fear were blown away from Makoto.

Ever since then, without warning, that fear will return. When he's at home, when he's at school, when he's swimming in the pool... When the fear came, his body would tense and his thoughts would stop cold. It was all he could do to fight against the attack of fear.

"I want to try swimming in the medley relay, and not just because Matsuoka-kun asked me to. So...Haru, let's swim it together. If you're not there, if it's not you, then it's no good. I want to swim with you, Haru!"

Haruka accepted Makoto's forceful words straight-on, without moving or changing expression. His gaze was so calm, he almost looked as though he could count Makoto's breaths and heartbeats.

Haruka's calm gaze cooled Makoto's burnt-out body and soul. Makoto could feel the waves inside his heart quickly dying down.

"Sorry, it looks like I said something pretty weird. Don't worry about it too much. It's getting dark, so I'm gonna head home."

The street lamps around the harbor were beginning to glow, and the moon was starting to rise at the edge of the sky.

"See you."

Just as Makoto was beginning to climb back down the stone steps after saying this, Haruka's serious mouth opened just a little.

"I'll think about it."

"Huh?"

"The relay."

Makoto's upturned eyebrows rose gently. His eyes crinkled, and the smile returned to his mouth. For now, just those words were enough.

"Well, then, I'll see you tomorrow, Haru."

"Yeah."

Makoto's heart felt so light that it couldn't even be compared to before. He felt as though he had finally set down the baggage he had been carrying all alone in his heart. He had a feeling that tomorrow and the days after it probably wouldn't be much different from today.



Even though Makoto was afraid of the water, he loved to swim, but when he got into the pool, he started wanting to flee, and so he thought that he wanted Haruka to be there with him, but Haruka was always so curt...

But right now, Makoto wasn't worried about it. For now, it was enough that Haruka knew about that side of him.

Makoto walked with a light step up the sunset stone stairs, following the path to his home.

## CHAPTER 4

### Relay

A freezing wind was blowing along the road to the school again in the morning. Rin was running by himself down the road where everyone was hunching their shoulders and walking with their faces turned downward. He passed by the other children as they exhaled their white breaths into the air, sometimes almost seeming as if he was going to run into them.

The poplar-lined street didn't lead to the swim club, so it wasn't the best choice for running. During the time when everyone was commuting to school, there were too many people on the road, and he couldn't run like he wanted to. Therefore, there wasn't much meaning in Rin running here, and it couldn't even be said that he wasn't a bit of a nuisance to the people around him.

Ahead of where Rin was running, a brown-tinted white scarf was waving in the wind. Rin raised his pace a little bit and caught up to the scarf, his breath coming out in white puffs as his feet stopped moving.

"Good morning, Yazaki-san."

A smile was blooming on Aki's face today, too, as she turned around. Rin wondered if she just always walked around with a smile on her face.

"Good morning, Matsuoka-kun. Did you run here?"

"Yeah, it's sort of like training."

To illustrate this, Rin puffed out a few more white breaths.

"Ah, that's amazing. But running in a place like this is sort of dangerous."

Rin breathed the puffs of white back in.

"Yeah, but I'm careful when I run, so..."

Aki's scarf fluttered in the breeze, brushing against Rin's cheek. The scarf which remained stained even though it had been washed... Rin didn't know why Haruka had climbed down the bank to pick up that scarf. At this point, he had no intention of asking, in the same way that he didn't intend to pursue the reason that Makoto had been trembling.

And so, Rin didn't even think of asking Aki why she was still wearing that brown-tinted scarf.

"I'm sorry I asked you to do something unreasonable yesterday."

As Rin said this, Aki shook her head slightly.

"Not at all. I think it's a good idea for Nanase-kun to swim in the relay, too."

"Oh? Why's that?"

Aki cast her eyes downward at Rin's straightforward question, still smiling. Then she raised her gaze slowly, looking somewhere far away.

"Nanase-kun seems like he can do anything all by himself, doesn't he? He's good at studying and sports and even art. He really can do anything, right? That's why everyone relies on him, but it would really be something for Nanase-kun to rely on anyone, wouldn't it?"

Rin certainly thought this was true. He had only just transferred, but the image that Rin had of Haruka was exactly that. But even if Haruka didn't have the will to go out and get involved with other people on his own, it wasn't like he was completely isolated. On the contrary, he was considered the most reliable person in their class, and when people relied on him, he always did his best to meet their expectations. This was the strange balance that people around Haruka had to maintain.

"I think Nanase-kun is a kind person. He probably holds back even when there are things that he really wants to say because he doesn't want to make people worry too much, don't you think? I'm sure he doesn't mean to hurt anyone or push anyone away. But I think it's not good for him to think that way so much. I think he needs to learn to be more assertive."

Aki turned to Rin, looking as though she wanted to hear what he thought.

Honestly, Rin had never thought of just going along with Haruka's personality. He knew that Haruka didn't exactly have a happy-go-lucky disposition, but what Rin was only concerned with was the fact that he wanted to swim in the relay with Haruka.

"I was thinking the same thing. That guy has no sense of humor. He should learn by watching me, don't you think?"

He joked lightly, being vague with his agreement.

Aki laughed a bit at his words.

"It's true. Add the two of you together and divide by two, and it would be perfect."

"Are you saying I'm already too much by myself?"

Aki's meaningful laugh confirmed his words.

"Oh, no, not at all. But I really do want to see Nanase-kun working together with all of you."

She looked up at the sky. Wintry cirrus clouds were flowing across the expanse as though they had been drawn with pastels.



Haruka climbed down the stone steps at just the same time that Makoto was descending, too.

"Hey, I'm not too late, see?"

"Let's go."

Haruka and Makoto ran side by side, their breath puffing out white as they went.

When they neared the Mutsuki Bridge, Nagisa was waiting for them. Haruka met Nagisa's excited wave by raising his right hand a bit. Nagisa's gaze went past Haruka and Makoto, and he waved hugely at whoever was standing there, too. Without looking, Haruka knew. It had to be Rin. The approaching footsteps got progressively louder, and just before Haruka reached the bridge, they fell into step beside him.

"Hey."

In response to Rin's greeting, Haruka raised his hand fleetingly. It looked more like he was trying to tell Rin go away with his wave.

Nagisa came up to run beside Haruka.

"Nanase-kun, today I'm going to keep up with you properly!"

"If you've been resting here, then it's not real training."

"Well, then, tomorrow I'll run in place while I wait for you."

Whether he was serious or joking, it was such a Nagisa-like thing to say that it was almost laughable. Behind Haruka, Makoto and Rin had burst into laughter in his place. Haruka looked at Nagisa's puzzled face - it seemed like he had been serious.

"When I said I'd run in place, I meant I'd run *really fast*!"





The pair behind them laughed even harder. Rin's feet got tangled for a second, and he looked as if he was going to lose his balance.

"I'm going to leave you behind while you're talking."

Haruka raised his speed a little bit. Was the wind blowing on the Mutsuki Bridge again today? Haruka forgot to think about it until he had already finished crossing.

Nagisa was earnestly trying to keep up with Haruka. If he kept up that pace, he wouldn't be able to run next to Haruka for the whole trip. That was how it had been yesterday. Nagisa's breath was coming short, and when Haruka saw him slow down a pace, he lightly turned his eyes downward.

*I guess that's as far as he goes.*

A sigh mixed with Haruka's long breaths. Then, by just a tiny increment, Haruka let his pace slacken.

"Oh?"

Rin said quietly. Haruka could almost hear him saying "You're so *nice*, *Nanase*," and he tsked inwardly. Nagisa caught up to him, smiling as if it hurt a bit. It looked like he'd lost the energy to keep talking.



When they reached Iwatobi SC, Nagisa's shoulders were shaking with his gasps.

"You did a good job."

Rin said, lightly patting Nagisa on the back. Nagisa looked like he wanted to say something, but he was breathing too hard for his voice to work. Even so, by the time they had changed and headed out to the poolside, Nagisa had completely returned to his usual self.

"Matsuoka-kun, are you doing relay practice today?"

"Yeah."

Rin replied as though he wasn't sure whether he wanted to or not. Even though he wanted to practice, they didn't have enough team members. Also, it had nothing to do with Nagisa.

"Fifth graders have time trials today. So, um, if - if - I place first in breaststroke, will you let me join your relay team?"

Rin took a long look at Nagisa's face. Where in his fragile body did Nagisa find a foundation for such confidence?

*Was I wrong? Is Nagisa different than I thought he was?*

Rin hadn't thought of him as anything more than the cute little-brother type. Until now, Rin hadn't felt even an atom of burning fighting spirit from Nagisa.

But when Rin thought about it, he had only been watching Nagisa for a month now. And really, when Rin had been in fifth grade, he'd been even more confident and audacious. He would have thought it was only natural to be chosen over the sixth-graders as a representative.

"Fine, but *only* if you place first."

Rin made the promise lightly. There was almost no chance that Nagisa would fulfill the condition.

"Yes! Hey, listen, Nanase-kun, I'm going to try my absolute hardest!"

"That's good, do your best."

It was a vague answer, but it looked like that was enough to encourage Nagisa. It wasn't time for him to swim yet, so he was just being innocently joyful.

*Maybe I was overthinking things.*

Rin thought, getting caught up in laughter with him.

"Hey, Matsuoka-kun, is it okay to make that kind of promise to him?"

Makoto whispered, sounding worried.

"Don't worry about it too much. Anyway, if he places first, then he places first, and it means he's got enough fighting potential that we can count on him."

Rin had decided to discern Nagisa's true, hidden nature. He wanted to find out whether that frail chest really was filled with a burning, passionate heart. If Nagisa really wanted to swim in the medley relay, he had to at least have that, or he'd be in trouble.

"Not that, I mean about Haru. Nagisa seems to think that Haru is already on the team."

"It's the other way around. It's kind of unfair to Nagisa, but this is a little plan to get Nanase to swim in the relay."

It was a slim hope, but it was the first step towards his goal. As far as Rin could see, Haruka didn't seem to be distancing himself from Nagisa quite as much. When he saw how happy Nagisa was at becoming a member of the team, while he himself was refusing to swim, how long would Haruka be able to stick to his opinion? If he felt even a little resistance to the idea of disappointing Nagisa, then the possibility was there. Just like when Haruka had let his pace slacken for Nagisa this morning.

It was shaky, about on a level with praying and waiting for a miracle, but it was a plan.



Fifth grade time trials were held in the twenty-five meter short course pool. They would compete by eights, in backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly and freestyle, in the same format they would in a competition, and have their fifty-meter times taken.

Makoto had gotten the answer "I'll think about it" from Haruka, but he thought that there was still a bit of distance from that to "I'll swim." It wasn't that Nagisa wanted to compete in freestyle, he wanted to swim with Haruka. Haruka was in the swim club, so Nagisa had come to join, too. Haruka started running, so Nagisa started running with him. Haruka competed in freestyle, so Nagisa wanted to swim freestyle, too. He hadn't asked Nagisa about this, but it looked clear enough to Makoto. To do things in order, they'd need to get Haruka to properly join as a team member, and after that they could think about Nagisa... As Makoto was thinking about this, he watched the fifth grade time trials, where Nagisa was standing on the starting block. The second heat of breaststroke was about to start. Makoto wondered exactly how much energy was packed into that frame, which looked so small compared to the other fifth-graders.

Nagisa put his toes on the edge of the starting block and bent his body double. He placed his hands on the edge of the block, waiting for the signal.

"On your mark!"

*Silence.*

The whistle sounded. All eight swimmers jumped at once. The point where Nagisa hit the water was closer to the blocks than the other competitors. A stroke, a kick. By the

time Nagisa raised his head above the water's surface, he was third. He was about two heads behind the front swimmer. It couldn't be called a good position, but Nagisa wasn't rushing himself, and he didn't seem to be feeling any strain. On the contrary, he seemed to be swimming with an even more comfortable stroke than usual.

All of the competitors were breaststroke swimmers, like Nagisa, but they each had their own various rhythms and styles. There were those like Nagisa, with big strokes that moved a lot of water. There were those who accelerated by turning their arms faster than was usual. There were those who seemed especially strong, and those who cut through the water as sharp as knives.

By around the twenty-meter mark, Nagisa was gradually closing in on those ahead of him, and had even drawn level with the second-place swimmer, but after the turn, the other swimmer had pulled ahead again. Even so, Nagisa drew level with him once more, and maybe the other swimmer was too impatient, because his rhythm broke slightly. Just like that, he slipped back into third place.

With about ten meters remaining, Nagisa was slowly raising his pace again, until there was barely space between him and the front. Since the outcome was decided by a wall-touch, Makoto thought that Nagisa's taller opponent would have the advantage, but just then, right before the goal, Nagisa stretched out his hand. That hand touched the surface of the wall, and the victory was decided.

Nagisa raised his face from the water, looking around himself worriedly. Then the times and rankings were announced, and his expression changed completely. He raised his right fist high, jumping through the water to express his joy.

Makoto gave him a round of applause, and then waved excitedly at him in return.

"That's amazing, Nagisa! You did it!"

Makoto gave him a thumbs-up, sticking his hand out in front of him. Nagisa mimicked his gesture.

Rin was standing with his arms folded and his mouth half-open, looking a little dazed.

"He seriously...did it."

That was what he finally said.

There was the sound of a splash from behind them, and when Makoto turned around, Haruka was swimming. Did he start swimming now because he had been watching Nagisa's time trial? Or was the timing a matter of chance? If asked, he probably wouldn't say, but if Haruka actually was worried about Nagisa, then it was

something he'd never done before. Perhaps something inside of Haruka was subtly changing.

Without even trying to hold back the feelings welling up from within his heart, Makoto dove into the lane next to Haruka.



While Rin was in the shower, he called out to be heard in the stall next to him.

"Nanase, what are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"About Nagisa. He seriously came in first."

"Looks that way."

Haruka's voice was nearly a whisper, and was almost drowned out by the noise of the shower.

Feeling unsatisfied, Rin sounded a bit irritated as he raised his voice.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Instead of an answer, he heard the sound of a shower curtain being opened. Rin blew out a long breath through his nose and scrubbed his head as if he were trying to tear his hair out.

When Haruka got to the locker room, Makoto and Nagisa were there ahead of him.

"Nanase-kun, did you see me?"

Nagisa rushed over to him with so much energy that Haruka almost thought Nagisa was going to jump on him.

"Yeah, I saw."

At that answer, Nagisa smiled with his whole face.

"You know, this is the first time I've placed first!"

"Is it?"



It was Haruka's usual type of reply, one without any particular interest or disinterest. But Nagisa's smile made it clear that was enough for him.

When he saw that Rin had come out of the shower room, Nagisa returned to the main question.

"So anyway, about your promise, Matsuoka-kun..."

Nagisa's words trailed off shyly, and he looked up at Rin with those big, round eyes. Rin wasn't sure what the conversation had been about, but there was only one promise Nagisa could be referring to.

"Well, I did promise. You're a member of the relay team, too, Nagisa."

While Rin was still finishing his sentence, Nagisa had already turned back to Haruka.

"I did it! I made it onto the same team as you, Nanase-kun!"

"Guess you did."

Haruka's casual answer caught Makoto and Rin's ears. He said it so smoothly that it almost slipped past them.

Makoto's eyes opened wide and he looked at Haruka.

"Haru, did you just--"

"Nanase, are you serious?"

Rin's words drowned out Makoto's. He had to hear it again to be sure.

"Are you really going to swim with us in the medley relay?"

"I was going to."

At Haruka's blunt answer, Rin couldn't hide his joy.

"Yes! We did it, Tachibana!"

He turned to Makoto in a victory pose, yelling with more enthusiasm than Nagisa.

"Yeah!"

"All right! From today onward, we're a team. Starting tomorrow, we're going to practice like crazy!"

Makoto and Nagisa nodded. Haruka just kept rubbing at his head with a towel.

"Oh, right, we should start calling each other by our first names. That'll make it feel more like we're comrades, don't you think? That means Nanase is Haru."

For a second, Haruka's hands paused in drying his head. He was hidden by the towel, so his face couldn't be seen. But he quickly returned to drying his hair.

"Tachibana will be called Makoto."

"Not very imaginative, huh?"

Makoto raised his upturned eyebrows and laughed as if he were amused.

"Hey, what about me?"

"Nagisa, we'll just keep calling you Nagisa, like we always have. And you all can call me 'Leader'."

"Whaaaat?"

Nagisa spoke up in a discontented voice.

"That's not right. 'Leader' isn't a name at all!"

Makoto laughed, and Rin put both hands on his hips reprovingly.

"Listen, the one called 'Leader' is the most important one on the team, who looks out for everybody and is sort of like the manager."

"Really? But 'Leader' still sounds weird. Wouldn't 'Rinrin' be better?"

"Uh..."

Rin tensed up, his mouth still open. Makoto held his stomach and laughed, and even Haruka's back was shaking as he dried his head.

Nagisa pointed at Makoto and Haruka.

"Also, Mako-chan and Haru-chan!"

Makoto stopped laughing, and Haruka dropped his towel on the floor.

"Tomorrow is going to be really fun! After all, relays are all about teamwork, aren't they? We'll all have to work hard together. Let's practice a lot!"

An indescribable atmosphere hung over the changing room, and only Nagisa's voice rang out with springtime cheerfulness.



"Good morning, Nanase-kun!"

As soon as Haruka entered the classroom, Aki's bright voice bounded into his ears.

"Hey."

For the moment, he gave her the bare minimum answer.

"I heard you're swimming in the relay."

Haruka surveyed the classroom. Makoto hadn't come in yet. Rin was getting out his textbooks and notebooks with an expression of feigned ignorance. Haruka decided that Rin must be Aki's informant.

"More or less."

Haruka tried to indicate that he wasn't completely positive, but it didn't seem to come across to Aki.

"Thank goodness! I really did think it would be good for you to swim in the relay, Nanase-kun. But I wasn't sure I said so clearly enough before, so I was worried."

*You didn't have to worry. I'm surrounded by a bunch of other annoyingly meddling people.*

Haruka thought, but said something else.

"How's your team?"

"Oh, it's going well. Our times are getting shorter every day, little by little."

Ultimately, that was what being in a relay meant. You couldn't swim just for yourself. You had to be concerned with things like winning and losing, responsibility, and teamwork. All of the things Haruka tried to avoid were packed into that list.

Until now, Haruka had swum to find a place under the water where he was free from obligation. But now, swimming in the relay was creating obligations for him even under the water.

"I can't wait to see Nanase-kun swimming with everyone! I definitely think your team will place first, Nanase-kun. You're all so fast!"

"It's not my team." Haruka paused for a moment to take a breath. Then he raised his voice so that Rin could hear. "*Rinrin's* the leader."

Rin's shoulders twitched. The whole class's gazes gathered on Rin, and after a second of silence, the laughter started. Even Aki couldn't withstand it, and burst out laughing.

Rin stood up and, squaring his shoulders, headed towards Haruka. Just as Haruka was wondering whether Rin was going to vent his agitation on him, Rin took a deep breath, regained his calm, and spoke in a voice that only Haruka and Aki could hear.

"You know, at my last school, I was always bullied and called 'Rin-chan'. I hated it so much that I transferred here, so I'm begging you. If I keep getting called '*Rinrin*', I might have to transfer again."

Haruka hadn't known about any of that. He didn't have any interest in what Rin had done at his previous school. And anyway, this whole story about being bullied seemed fishy to him.

"I'm sorry."

Aki apologized in place of Haruka.

"Wait, why are you apologizing, Yazaki-san?"

"Because I laughed. I didn't know anything about you being bullied..."

"That's right, I was too shy to say anything back to them, so the bullying just kept getting worse and worse. It was terrible."

"Oh, really?"

Aki was listening, her face serious.

*As if there's any way someone shy would call himself shy. This is beyond fishy; it's more like he's trying to get a laugh.*

That was all Haruka could think.

*But I'm not an easy enough mark to laugh at something like this.*

Right at the point Haruka was thinking that this was so stupid he couldn't go along with it anymore, with perfect timing, Makoto walked into the classroom.

"Good morning, Haru, Zaki-chan, and, um, Rinrin, was it?"

"You shouldn't call him that!"

Aki told Makoto, looking serious, before Rin had a chance to say anything.

"Oh, really? I thought we had decided on 'Rinrin' yesterday, but..."

"He said there was some bullying about names at his last school."

"Bullying? Who was bullied?"

"Matsuoka-kun, obviously!"

Makoto, the easy mark, raised his upturned eyebrows and laughed.

"Don't laugh!"

Aki said it so seriously that Makoto resisted laughing any more.

"Sorry, sorry. But there's no one around here who would bully you for something like that, so you can relax."

Just as Makoto said this, like a gong announcing the end of a boring match, the chimes rang to announce the start of class.



March came, and the days grew warmer, the tiny buds on the trees blew in the wind, and little by little, the birds' calls grew more energetic. The wind was blowing over the Mutsuki Bridge again today, but it had lost its winter harshness.

The breaths that Haruka and Makoto exhaled were no longer white. They were invisible and warm, melting into the wind. Rin was catching up behind Haruka, and at about the same time, Nagisa was coming forward to meet him.

"I wasn't resting, you know. I was running in place the whole time."

Nagisa was breathing quite hard.

Rin's breaths aligned with Nagisa's.

"You know, you say the same thing every day."

"Well, I run in place every day."



Rin seemed somehow irritated today, to the point that he got caught up in Nagisa's insignificant comments.

"Rinrin, you say the same things every day, too. Like about how we're a team..."

Before Nagisa had finished speaking, Rin cut him off.

"Come on, Nagisa. My name is 'Rin.' It's definitely not 'Rinrin'."

"What, really? You mean, that complicated character isn't read as 'Rinrin'? Oh, well. It's fine."

"What is?"

"It's fine if I keep calling him 'Rinrin', right?"

Nagisa wasn't asking Rin, he was looking to Haruka for approval.

"It's okay with me."

"Haru, you...!"

Makoto interrupted Rin, who looked like he was about to snap at Haruka.

"That's no good, Nagisa. If you keep calling him 'Rinrin', he'll have to transfer again."

"In that case, 'Rin-chan' is fine, right? Geez, so demanding."

Just as Rin was about to say something to Nagisa, Haruka sped up.

"I'm going to leave you behind while you're talking."

Makoto pushed Nagisa's back lightly.

"Nagisa, don't slow down."

The warm breath of the four boys ran through the air over the riverbank in the approaching spring.



In the beginning, Nagisa's breath would be ragged by the time they reached the changing room, but nowadays he was completely fine.

*Maybe he's getting used to running.*

As Haruka was thinking about this, Rin, who had already finished changing, put his hands on his hips and abruptly raised his voice.

"Everybody, listen up!"

*We can hear you even if you don't yell so loud. What are you so fired up about?*

Haruka didn't put the thought into words, but complained with his gaze instead. It didn't look like it got through to Rin, though. He just kept talking loudly.

"I'm sure you all know that the meet is getting close. So I was thinking, we should change up our practice methods."

"How should we change them?"

Makoto asked, putting on his cap.

"I was thinking we could make relays the center--or really, make our practice all about relays."

"Yes!"

Nagisa immediately threw both his hands in the air in celebration. Ever since he had become a member of the team, Nagisa had been looking forward to relay training. Everything seemed to be working out in his favor.

In contrast, Makoto looked worried.

"What should we do about our other practice?"

"We won't."

"We won't...? You mean..."

"I want us to concentrate on just relay training."

Rin's enthusiastic gaze met Makoto's bewildered one.

"But we have to practice, or we won't swim well at the meet."

"The other races..."

Rin paused to look at Makoto, then at Haruka.

"...We won't swim them."

Silence filled the locker room, the tension piling up and building. In the midst of the oppressive atmosphere, Haruka's words drifted, not yelling or attacking, as if he were simply talking to himself.

"Who decided that?"

"No one has. It's being decided right now. I'm not entering any events other than the relay, so I wanted everyone else to do the same. I feel like if you don't, if you won't go that far, we can't win."

Haruka slammed the door of his locker closed with a sound that echoed and hurt everyone's ears.

"Who are we supposed to beat? What are their times? Why do we just have to go along with whatever you say?"

"Haru!"

Makoto cut in when Haruka paused.

*Good timing.*

Haruka thought. He didn't intend to argue with Rin anymore, and on top of that, he didn't intend to go along with Rin's way of doing things anymore, either. It was troublesome to be dragged around and to have Rin being stubborn. Haruka was going to do what he wanted. He felt that he had communicated all of these things well enough. That was why he felt that Makoto's interruption was well-timed.

*I want to hurry and go somewhere where Rin's enthusiasm can't reach. I want to hurry and sink into the water.*

Haruka turned his face to the side and fell silent.

Makoto spoke up with a question.

"Haru, we're on the same team for the relay. That isn't going to change, right?"

Haruka had no intention of resigning. He hadn't made the decision frivolously. He meant to see it through to the end. Those feelings wouldn't change, and he didn't intend to change them.

While Haruka was still looking to the side silently, Makoto let out a small breath and turned back to Rin.

"Why are you so hung up on the relay? If you have some kind of reason, you should tell us."

Rin's resolve didn't waver at all. With his hands still on his hips, he looked past Makoto at Haruka. He had probably been prepared for some dissent. That was probably the reason why he was so firmly resolved.

"I'm not gonna force anyone. But if you really want to win in the relay, you've got to do at least that much. Since I've decided to do this, I want to be the absolute victor. That's my reason."

Words like *winning* and *victory*, which never entered into Haruka's reasons for doing things, were coming out of Rin's mouth.

*I won't swim for things like that.*

But Haruka kept quiet, because he didn't want to be asked *Well, then, why do you swim?* in return.

Makoto drew his upturned eyebrows together, looking confused.

"Hold on a minute. I want to win, too, but practicing for only the relay is, well... I wanted enter breaststroke events, and compete in freestyle, too."

At the last meet, Makoto had competed and won in the hundred-meter breaststroke. Rin had won the fifty-meter in both the breaststroke and freestyle events. But now Rin was talking about focusing on the relay, throwing away other events where he was favored to win. In the face of such an incomprehensible proposal, it would be stranger not to be confused.

"Can we have some time to think it over? And for today at least, can we practice like we normally do?"

Makoto asked.

Rin let his hands fall from his hips and his face returned to its usual smile. His determined attitude melted away along with the breath he let out, disappearing from the locker room.

"Sorry for bringing something like that up all of a sudden. You guys can decide what to do for yourselves, of course, and I won't complain. But this is how I feel, and I wanted you to at least understand that."

Makoto nodded, and Nagisa, who had been silent up until then, looked up at Rin.

"I'm gonna practice for the relay with you, Rin-chan. And I'm only gonna enter the relay, too!"

Rin smiled broadly. Whatever his reasons, Nagisa had accepted Rin's selfish proposal.

"Thanks, Nagisa. But my practices are gonna be really tough."

"That's fine, because I'm number one out of all the fifth-graders!"

Nagisa said, his chest puffed out with pride, and Rin spoke up to motivate him.

"All right! Let's hurry up and practice, then!"

Rin snapped the strap of his goggles into place, and Nagisa imitated him.

"Yeah!"

Watching their backs as the two of them headed to the pool, Haruka felt like he was lost in a deep fog. It was as if he couldn't see what had just happened. He had wanted to pass on getting wrapped up in anything. Even so, it looked like he was already completely immersed. Every time he resolved not to be jerked around anymore, the fog just became deeper and thicker.



## CHAPTER 5

### *Stroke*

The water's surface rippled with a small splash. A stroke, a kick. The rings spread out, and after them, Nagisa's head rose to the surface. He relaxedly pushed his way through the water, made the turn, and came back. His style of swimming was a bit different than it had been on the day of the time trials.

Rin was on the starting block, watching Nagisa swim with a sense of unease. Nagisa touched the wall with both hands and raised his face from the water. Rin, who should have jumped in over Nagisa's head already, was still standing on the starting block.

"What's the matter, Rin-chan?"

Nagisa asked, between ragged breaths.

"Were you swimming at full speed just now?"

"Yeah."

Nagisa was peering earnestly through his goggles at Rin, his eyes big and round. There were no worries, doubts, or untruths to be found in those eyes. Even so, Rin tried to peer into their depths, but he quickly realized that there was no need to do so, and looked away. Nagisa's eyes weren't the slightest bit murky; they were as clear as anything. So much so that Rin could tell even through the goggles.

Nagisa wouldn't try to hide what he was thinking. And anyway, Nagisa wasn't the type to feel ashamed in front of people. He was able to believe things earnestly, and so his expressions were earnest. That was how Nagisa was. For Rin, that was the most difficult personality type to deal with. If Nagisa had been the deceitful, evasive type, his heart would have been vulnerable due to the things he was hiding. Even Rin himself had weaknesses in his heart from where he was hiding the truth.

But Nagisa had no such weaknesses.

"Hasn't your swimming style changed since the day of the time trial?"

"It's still the same."

It looked like the person in question hadn't realized it himself yet. Is this what is meant by 'often, people don't understand themselves'? Perhaps things like assumptions and ideals get in the way, and it can be hard to see clearly.

"Your time's slipping."

"Really?"

Nagisa pulled off his goggles and peered up at Rin from below, right into his eyes, and then deeper into them. Rin stood up, fleeing from Nagisa's gaze.

"You were faster before."

*That race wasn't a fluke.*

This was Rin's fervent hope. Once someone improved their time, it didn't just slip like that. Especially for kids in their growth spurts, like they were. It wasn't just the body or muscle strength that grew; things like technical skill and strength of heart were included in growth spurts, too.

"That's weird, I wonder why? I really haven't changed the way I'm swimming."

"Hey, during the race, were you watching your opponent?"

"Yeah, I definitely was."

"Well, that's it, then. You were probably feeling like you had to swim faster than your opponent. Without realizing it, feeling like that made you go faster, Nagisa."

"Feelings can make you swim faster?"

"Yeah, they can."

Strength of feeling can make people grow. Sometimes it can even change them so dramatically that it could be called an evolution. That was the reason that Nagisa had shown swimming skills that surpassed his normal strength during the time trial. Raising Nagisa's skills to the level of a limit he had already passed once shouldn't be that difficult. That was the special privilege of those in their growth spurts.

"Want to try swimming with me?"

"With you, Rin-chan? I think I'll lose, but..."

"I'll go easy on you."

But he wasn't going to swim at the pace Nagisa had been going.

"If you pass me, you'll be beating your old record, right?"

"Yeah!"

The two of them lined up on the starting blocks, their breaths matching rhythm. Then Rin quietly said,

"Let's go. Ready, start!"

They landed about the same distance out on the water, rings spreading around them. A stroke, a kick. Nagisa's head broke the water just slightly after Rin's. Nagisa was slowing down after all. Closing the gap left over from their starts was no easy thing. In Nagisa's case, there was a problem with his angle of entry. To put it another way, if he could correct that, his time would improve again. But that wouldn't be easy, either.

Rin could feel Nagisa's fingertips break the surface of the water. They felt like they were about level with Rin's hips. The gap between them didn't grow or shrink when they made the twenty-five meter turn. With fifteen meters remaining, Rin could feel Nagisa's fingers reaching forward. The gap didn't close. Just as Rin was wondering whether it had been his imagination, Nagisa's arms suddenly stretched out. It hadn't been Rin's imagination, or Nagisa's fingertips, but Nagisa's whole arm that had been reaching forward. He was rushing on with great force, as if to stab through Rin's shoulders. Suddenly, something was running after Rin's back.

During the time trials, the swimmer who had nearly overtaken Nagisa had been thrown out of rhythm somehow, and now Rin finally understood why.

Every stroke closed the gap. Nagisa's arms were taking Rin's chin, stealing the space before his eyes. With five meters left, Nagisa was neck-and-neck with Rin. In Rin's eyes, Nagisa wasn't Nagisa anymore; he couldn't see him as anything but an unknown quantity.

*He's passing me!*

The moment he thought that, Rin put his power into his shoulders. With just a scant head-length of distance between them, Rin reached the goal and climbed straight up onto the poolside. He was so out of breath that he could barely believe that he had only swum fifty meters.

Rin hadn't been lying when he said he'd hold back. He was confident that he'd been within half a second of Nagisa's best time. So why had he pushed himself at the end? The short answer was "fear".

It wasn't that Rin's fighting instincts had been roused, or that he'd become serious. It was that Rin had been afraid of Nagisa, who was gaining on him, and so he had run. And because he couldn't even stand to be in the same water as Nagisa, he had jumped out of the pool.

Nagisa looked up at Rin, who was lingering and dripping on the poolside.

"What's wrong, Rin-chan?"

Rin couldn't look Nagisa in the face.

*Why was I afraid of someone like Nagisa?*

He tried to ask himself, but no answer came. If their eyes met, Rin would once again feel like Nagisa was peering through his heart, so he spoke with his face still turned to the side.

"See? you can do it if you try."

"I can't do it! I didn't catch up, did I?"

*No, you did catch up.*

Nagisa had definitely caught up to his personal best. Rin had been forced to run.

"Your reach is--"

Rin's voice was strained as he spoke up.

"Yeah?"

It was Nagisa's usual voice. Rin's teammate, the little-brother type Nagisa. He certainly wasn't any kind of "unknown quantity." Rin breathed out the tense feeling he'd been holding in his chest, and was finally able to look at Nagisa.

"Your reach is getting longer."

"Mine is?"

Nagisa asked, looking at his right arm.

"Yeah. During the second half, you were gaining on me. That's when your reach was getting longer."

"Really? I couldn't tell at all, though..."

"Hey, while you were swimming, what were you thinking about?"

"About catching up completely, and nothing else."

Nagisa answered readily. Did he not think about his form or his rhythm at all?

Each person had their own form and rhythm that suited them. It wasn't an easy thing to discover; someone might think they had found it and be wrong, or pass right by it

without knowing. Rin was still in the process of searching for his through repeated trial and error. That was why he was always thinking while he swam; he never swam recklessly. He hadn't thought that just swimming with all his might would help his times.

But Rin had also known that concentrating with all your might could, from time to time, miraculously bring out your best form. In other words, concentration could be called strength of feeling. It was true that Rin had told Nagisa that feelings could make you swim faster, but he hadn't thought it would be shown this clearly.

"Hey, the way you swam just now, do you think you could do it again?"

"Um, I'm not really sure..."

It was an expected answer, since Nagisa had been swimming without much consideration. It looked like Nagisa was the type who memorized things with his muscles.

"Want to try swimming with me again?"

"Sure."

Nagisa climbed up onto the poolside. How could he give that kind of chase with that tiny, delicate body? Maybe there was a hint to Rin's sought-after best form there. Thinking about this and that, Rin climbed up onto the starting block.

"Let's go!" One breath. "Ready, start!"

Rin's and Nagisa's legs danced in midair and their bodies were pulled in by the water.

The goal Rin was aiming for was fifty meters away - or was it farther? Without knowing exactly where he was going, for now, he just kept repeating his stroke. Stronger, faster, thinking about nothing else.



Swimmers who were competing in the same events had been split into groups, and the various groups were each doing their own practice. This was so that, with the meet so close, each group could focus on the events they specialized in. Usually, at this point Makoto would be in the breaststroke group, but this time he was in the backstroke group.

Since Haruka specialized in freestyle, Rin in butterfly, and Nagisa in breaststroke, inevitably, Makoto had to become the backstroke swimmer.

It wasn't as if Makoto had never swum backstroke before, or even as if he was bad at it. But he had never swum it at a meet before. Because of this, he had never been timed, so in a way, you could say it was an event he had never properly swum before. This was because he had never tried the s-curve pull.

Up until now, Makoto had always swum with the standard straight pull. This meant stretching your arms straight out like a ship's oars, but with that style, there was too much loss, and you couldn't get much speed. With a ship's oars, you could compensate by pulling both the left and right oars at the same time, but because you had to alternate arms in backstroke, if you tried to pull too hard without moving straight forward, you would end up wiggling like a goldfish. Because of this, in order to distribute your power evenly between the start of your stroke and the finish, you couldn't put all your strength into it.

On the other hand, the movement of the s-curve pull had no waste in it, and in theory it was faster than a straight pull, but because the motion was complex, if you weren't used to it, you could end up struggling with water resistance.

Makoto gripped the wall hard with both hands, and from his stance with both legs braced against the wall, he drew his body in tightly for a moment, then kicked off at an upward angle. His body only hung in the air for a moment, and then the world around him turned to water. He made his landing in the water, and began to flutter kick. While rising to the surface, he started his stroke. And then, the s-curve pull.

*Ah, that's it.*

He thought. It was different. It was different from how he usually felt. Usually, when he jumped into the pool, he felt as though he was being roughly licked by the evil *something*, and his body locked up, but now he didn't feel like that at all. He could still feel the licking sensation, but his body didn't freeze up.

His arms were stretching out. His body was stretching out.

*This is my swimming.*

He thought.

*I'm not running from the water. Maybe this is the real me. Maybe this is my true swimming style.*

When his arms entered the water, he scooped deep into the water on his catch. He sketched an arc close to his body, and pulled as if he was throwing a ball. He



scooped deep once more and pushed. At the same time, he stretched out his recovery hand with a jerk to make his entry.

He could see the sky. He looked right through the ceiling of the club, and he could see the sky. Though he could still feel the presence of the evil thing, as long as he was looking at the sky, his body didn't lock up. As though he was shaking free, he didn't feel any need to run away. Though he was still swimming powerfully, he wasn't straining himself.

He made the turn and began his stroke again.

*It's really different.*

Was it because he was swimming without looking at the bottom of the water, where the evil thing was hiding? Or was it because he was looking at the sky?

*That could be it, too.*

He thought. But the biggest, most important factor was the swimming style. He felt streamlined. Even when he didn't focus on the correct posture, his body naturally found itself in that form. Before he even thought about it, his arms stretched out, and he was able to ride on the water. He could feel the water.

*Like a marine mammal, maybe.*

Perhaps he had originally been a monstrous sea creature.

*That's ridiculous.*

He thought. But he couldn't think of anything else. If he hadn't been, then what was this sense of completion? Where was this satisfied feeling welling up from? This feeling that Makoto had never felt before set him free in the water.

Even when he climbed up onto the poolside, Makoto was still exultant. He turned and walked toward the bench, trying to hold the feeling back somehow. Aki had parked herself on the bench.

"Oh, are you doing backstroke, too, Zaki-chan?"

Makoto tried to talk to her a bit.

"Ah, Tachibana-kun! No, I'm doing free."

"Taking a break?"

"Yeah.... I was just thinking a bit."

"About the medley relay?"

"....No."

"Ah, I've got it. About the garden planting tomorrow, right?"

Since the bricks had finally been fired, Makoto's class was going to be building with them tomorrow. Duties had been allotted to each class: putting flowers into the soil, carrying water, and so forth. The problem was, in order to build with the bricks, they had to use cement. Even though they had planned out how to do it, there had still been people who were worried that it wouldn't go well.

"No, that's not it. A plasterer is coming, so it'll be fine. They even said that they'd lay the cement for us."

"We should have just asked Haru."

"What, Nanase-san? But wouldn't that be too difficult?"

"It would be fine. Haru laid the bricks in the garden at home by himself."

"In his garden?"

"Yeah. When he walked in his garden, he'd get mud on his feet, right? And on rainy days, the front hall would get dirty, so he made a path with cement and bricks. He did a good job, too. It's only about one meter long, though."

"Wow, really? He's pretty skilled after all, huh?"

Even though Aki was smiling, Makoto could sense shadows in her face.

"But that's not what you were thinking about, is it?"

"No. ...It's about Nanase-kun."

"About Haru?"

"I'm doing nothing but practicing freestyle right now, and I was wondering, why won't Nanase-kun swim anything but free?"

*Why are you worrying about that? It's not like it's something that just started happening.*

As Makoto's eyes drifted over to Haruka's freestyle practice group, he asked Aki,

"Why were you wondering about that?"

"Nanase-kun's freestyle is really fast, isn't it? So I was thinking about what kind of feelings he has when he swims. If I can understand his feelings even a little bit, then maybe my freestyle will get faster, too."

Makoto's eyes found Haruka. Even though he was far away, Makoto recognized him immediately. He was relaxedly swimming with all the elegance of a dolphin. Makoto wondered if Haruka could feel the water, too.

"About Haru, it's not really so much that he *likes* swimming."

"What?"

"It's not really that he likes freestyle."

"But, then, why...?"

Makoto turned his gaze back to Aki, looking away from the freestyle group.

"I haven't asked him about it, but swimming means something different to Haru than it does to the rest of us."

"What does that mean?"

Aki blinked, still looking at Makoto. It was almost as if Makoto was some kind of animal she'd never seen before.

"It's natural for Haru to be in the water."

"Huh?"

"And, you know, the most natural stroke is probably freestyle."

"So you're saying it's like a skill he was born with?"

"Yeah. To put it simply, it's instinct. It's sort of like asking why a dolphin or a whale is in the ocean, I think."

Makoto himself had felt something close to that just a little while ago. He couldn't confirm that it was precisely the same, but he didn't think it was that greatly different, either.

"If that's really true, then it's not something I can learn to understand, is it?"

"I think it's not really something anyone can understand. Haru's feelings, I mean..."

Aki turned her eyes toward the freestyle group. Towards Haruka, who was swimming among them.

"Well, I'm going back to practice, then."

As Makoto said this, he turned away from Aki.

"Yeah."

Aki's gaze was still on Haruka. Makoto returned to the backstroke group, noticing how faint her answer had been.



They had piled the fired bricks under the cherry tree. The once-brown lumps of earth had oxidized and were now tinged with red, and were stacked neatly, almost glowing in the sunlight of the approaching spring.

Next to them were bags of cement and metal buckets, along with various tools. It was the boys' job to mix the cement with water. When the bags were cut open, grey dust would swirl up, but quickly settle again. When a shovel was dug into it, dust would fly up; when it was transferred into the buckets, dust would fly up; and when the water was poured in, the dust would fly up yet again, but settle quickly.

Around the cherry tree, a shallow rectangle had been dug out. This was where the flower bed had been planned. Stakes had been pounded into the four corners; a string had been run between them, and, using that string to check that they were level, bricks were being laid step by step. Cement was spread on the bricks, they were lined up, and once the first level was complete, cement was spread on top of them and a second layer of bricks was lined up. This was the process by which the job progressed.

The job of laying cement was a troublesome obstacle. Because they had to line the bricks up evenly while making the height uniform, care and skill were needed.

The tools were brought over to Haruka, as planned. Without confusion or hesitation, Haruka picked up the tools and headed over to the base of the cherry tree.

Carrying bricks was the girls' job. Haruka would spread cement on the bricks they brought over, and then line the bricks up properly.

"Sorry, Nanase-kun. We asked you to do something pretty tough,"

Aki said, handing over her bricks.

"Not really. I've done it before, and now I'll have the plasterer's explanation."

Haruka answered without looking at Aki. He had to concentrate hard right down to his fingertips. If he was even a little careless, the cement would ripple and the bricks would be tilted. There were various messages written on the bricks, but if he let them catch his attention, he felt like the point of his trowel would slip.

Haruka concentrated only on spreading cement. He had even forced his objections to the flower bed under the cherry tree off into the corner of his heart.

"It's looking good!"

Rin called from behind Haruka. There was no way he could expect an answer, so Haruka gave no sign of responding. He scooped some more cement onto the bricks and kept working.

"Maybe I'll give it a try, too."

*You don't have to go to the trouble of telling me. If you want to, then just go ahead and do it.*

After the sound of Rin's footsteps faded in the distance, Haruka suddenly noticed that the cement had rippled a little bit. Had he really been thrown out of whack just by Rin calling out to him? Haruka felt a bit of irritation in his heart.

After a short time, Rin came back, and sat down on Haruka's opposite side. Using the plaster trowel he held in his right hand, Rin started smoothing out the cement with surprising delicacy. There wasn't even two meters of distance between Haruka and Rin. Haruka found this distance uncomfortable. If Rin had been closer, Haruka could have blatantly moved away from him, and if Rin had been a little farther away, they would have been too far apart to converse.

"Haru, I think we should start timing ourselves tomorrow."

Just as Haruka had expected, Rin spoke up.

"I was thinking we could do race-format practice, but..."

His words trailed off meaningfully. He wasn't going to go ahead and decide by himself like he always did. For Rin, this seemed rather timid.

"Sure, whatever."

Haruka answered as expressionlessly as always, without letting his eyes leave the bricks. Though honestly, he thought he didn't really need to pick up the conversation.

Rin nodded a bit, as though he was satisfied.

"Nagisa's gotten faster."

Haruka knew. Even if it was just for a little while, they were on the same team.

"His reach is getting longer."

"....."

"It's on his up-kick. It looks like he doesn't realize it himself, but when he draws his legs in, he tips upwards. But it looks like he can only do it during times he thinks are really important."

"....."

"After that, if he can just get his start down properly, he'll get even faster."

That might be true, but it wasn't like they needed to talk about it right now. Couldn't Rin be quiet?

"But I think it's more important to teach Nagisa about stuff like timing and concentration, rather than about what a race feels like."

*And what do you know about it that's worth teaching?*

Shaking off his slight irritation, Haruka focused on the movement of his trowel. He took great care so that the cement wouldn't ripple. He didn't want to pay attention to Rin's speech anymore.

When the first layer was finally finished, Haruka stood up to take a break. In all, he'd have to build three layers. The sun was still high, and it looked like he could finish before evening. If possible, he'd like to finish a bit earlier and go to the swim club. As long as he'd done enough, he didn't care; he was only thinking that he wanted to swim.

Haruka looked over at Rin and saw that Rin was nearly done with his first layer. The surface was laid evenly, and it had been carefully finished off. Haruka had to admire Rin's ability to complete the project so skillfully while talking Haruka's ear off.

"Haru, I brought some more."

Makoto was carrying a metal bucket of cement over, holding it with both hands as if it was heavy. He placed the bucket in front of Haru and then took a breather. The bucket was brimming with cement, and it was easy to guess how heavy it was. Average grade-schoolers would have brought it over with two people carrying it between them.



Lately, it seemed like Makoto had gotten a size bigger again. It wasn't that he had gotten especially taller; it felt more like he was wearing a suit of armor.

"I wonder if we'll be able to go to practice today."

Makoto's carefree tone was like the blue sky that governed the spring.

Rin finished his first layer and stood up.

"I was just talking to Haru about it, but I was thinking we could start race-style practice tomorrow. And time ourselves, too."

"That's a good point. The meet is getting closer."

Leaving Makoto to be Rin's conversation partner, Haruka started working on the second layer. He wanted to work quietly. He wanted to finish this as if it were any old job, without thinking about anything, forgetting that this was a graduation project, driving off even the knowledge that he was under the cherry tree.

*I want to hurry up and get in the water.*

He tried to think only about that.

The wind that brushed against Haruka's cheeks felt gentle, like spring. He wanted to get into the water quickly to shake off that lukewarm feeling.



In the spring, Mt. Kotsuzumi grows a little bit. Since it's about one head-length shorter than Mt. Myoujin, they have been likened to a pair of brothers since long ago. Around the time that trees begin to sprout buds, Mt. Kotsuzumi grows just a little bit, like a younger brother trying to catch up to his elder brother.

In reality, there's no way that a mountain could change its height. Due to things like the spread of vegetation, the increase of foliage, and the color of the sky, it only seemed that way.

Haruka wiped off the sweat that had gathered on his cheeks as he approached the Mutsuki Bridge. Not only was his pace faster than normal, but the temperature outside was higher, too.

It looked like Makoto and Rin weren't coming today. Nagisa had already left some time ago. It had been a while since Haruka had crossed the bridge alone. The wind

was blowing over the bridge again today. It seemed like it had been a long time since he had run while feeling the wind, too. Originally, he had planned to run alone like this. Running with Rin and Nagisa hadn't been anywhere in Haruka's plans at all. It was the same way with swimming in a team.

Swimming was fundamentally an individual contest, and Haruka thought relays were an extension of that. That was why it seemed logical to him to practice individually, and he saw no need to fixate on being in a team.

If this were something like baseball or soccer, where things like formation and cooperative play mattered, then it would certainly be necessary to focus on teamwork. They would have to understand each other's abilities, compensate for their various weaknesses, and adjust their power and balance as a whole. Things like breathing and eye contact couldn't possibly be done without practice.

But there was no need for eye contact or formations in swimming. Once you jumped into the water, you were alone. All each swimmer had to do was show their respective power and swim as fast as they could. There was no other way that Haruka could think about it.

Rin had spoken about it so excitedly, Makoto had exclaimed that it was no good without Haruka, Nagisa had wanted to be a team member, and Aki had told Haruka that it would be better if he swam in the relay.

What was so special about a race called a relay? If there was something there that he didn't understand, then Haruka thought that maybe it was worth trying, even if he had to pay the price. Even if the price was having others interfere, being forced to cooperate with them, and being coerced into doing things against his will.

Once Haruka had prepared himself, he decided. He had no intention of being overruled so easily. He didn't intend to refuse to swim or to run as a foursome; if that was necessary for the relay, then he had no reason to refuse. It was just that Haruka still didn't see anything special about calling a race a relay. It just meant continuing to swim while you had chains wrapped around you.



When Haruka left the locker room and went out to the poolside, Nagisa came over and attached himself to Haruka.

"Haru-chan, what are you doing? You're really late! Where are Rin-chan and Mako-chan?"

It threw Haruka off. Even compared to himself from a year ago, Nagisa was too childish. It seemed cruel to think of pushing Nagisa away, or distancing himself. Even now, Haruka still wasn't sure how to deal with Nagisa. On the other hand, though, it wasn't like he could just become someone who could return Nagisa's sociability.

Haruka decided to just act as close to his normal self as he could, though he already felt the contradiction between trying to be his usual self and doing things that weren't like his usual self at all.

"Graduation project. Those two might not be coming today."

"Oh, is that it? Well, I guess that's fine, then. Let's hurry up and go practice!"

The practice that Nagisa was talking about was for the relay. Right now, the meaning of swimming was completely relay-focused for Nagisa. Swim fast, and then win. It was a goal that was almost too clear in its simplicity. Even if it was only a little bit, Nagisa could see more significance in the relay than Haruka could.

Did they have to have the same goals just because they were teammates? Was that what teamwork meant? Was that what cooperation meant? If that was the case, then Haruka was going to lose the meaning of his swimming.

Nagisa was standing on the starting block.

"Ready, go!"

He said, and jumped in at his own signal. Haruka had no intention of saying practical things like Rin did. To begin with, he didn't worry about things like that when he swam. On top of that, Haruka had never been interested in anyone else's form. He could feel it, though. There was dissonance somewhere in Nagisa's swimming. It wasn't something that Haruka could put into words; he just felt it. It was an uncomfortable feeling, like a metronome with a worn-out spring. It was jarring, like a bicycle with rusted gears.

Nagisa made the fifty-meter turn and came back. Right as Nagisa was passing seventy meters, it looked to Haruka as if his arms were growing. They seemed so long that they were out of balance with his height. In that instant, the uncomfortable feeling disappeared. Nagisa was keeping rhythm with a relaxed stroke, just like always. There was no indication that he was putting more power into it, or increasing the rotation of his stroke at all. Even so, with fifteen meters remaining, he accelerated yet again. And then, with five meters left, he sped up once more and touched the wall.

Haruka's feet kicked off the starting block, and his body danced through the air.

He had heard from Rin that Nagisa had begun to swim that way, but even having seen it right in front of him in reality, it seemed hard to understand. Without Haruka's conscious knowledge, Nagisa and Mt. Kotsuzumi had overlapped in his mind. He knew that it was an illusion that Mt. Kotsuzumi looked like it was growing in the spring. He wondered if Nagisa's growth was an illusion, too, but quickly rejected the idea. Rejecting the whole idea that Nagisa and the mountain were similar, Haruka slipped forward through the opening in the water just like he always did.



Serious practice for the meet began around the time that soil was being spread on the graduation flower garden, when various seeds were being planted. The practice schedule for each day was split roughly into halves: in the first half, everyone who was swimming an individual event was gathered together to have their times taken, and the second half was devoted to things like relay and long distance practice.

During the first half, Haruka swam freestyle and Makoto swam backstroke and breaststroke, and during the second half, they participated in relay practice; this had become their training schedule lately. Rin and Nagisa's training schedule was relay practice during both halves.

Today, Aki and Yuuki had joined Rin and Nagisa's practice. Aki and Yuuki sometimes practiced with them like this. In order to calm the worry and impatience that people who weren't swimming relays couldn't understand, they practiced with Rin and Nagisa.

Both of Nagisa's hands touched the wall, and Rin dove into the water. Nagisa pushed up his goggles and continued to follow the far-off Rin with his eyes. A sigh mixed in with his labored breaths.

Aki hadn't thought that Nagisa would work himself this hard. He had kept going so many times that she'd lost count, and he hadn't complained even once. He must be extremely tired. His diving form was falling apart, and the speed of his breaststroke was dropping.

Aki wondered if the level of Haruka's team was too high for Nagisa. Nagisa himself was probably feeling something similar. But maybe that was exactly why he was

trying so hard. He was probably earnestly thinking that he didn't want to be the one holding his team back.

Nagisa tried to climb up onto the poolside, but he couldn't get enough power, and it looked like he was going to fall back into the water, so Aki grabbed his arm and pulled him out.

"Thanks...*huff*...Zaki-chan...*huff*..."

"Let's take a quick break, okay?"

"Yeah."

nodded between gasps. He didn't pretend to be tough or put up fronts. If he was told to work hard, then he worked hard, and if he was told to rest, then he rested. Nagisa was always nothing more or less than himself.

Nagisa sank to the floor and pulled off his cap. Aki sat down next to him.

"You've gotten fast, haven't you, Nagisa-kun?"

"Yeah, but if I don't swim faster, I'll lose."

"Lose? To who?"

"I don't know. Rin-chan said so."

"Oh, really?"

Aki turned her eyes toward Rin, who was getting out of the water. She wondered who Rin was competing with. He always seemed to be in a hurry. He was always looking for something, running towards somewhere. Aki wondered how Nagisa felt, chasing after someone like Rin.

"Zaki-chan, who taught you how to dive?"

Aki was confused by the sudden question.

"Well, I'm not sure. But why...?"

"I can't get it right. I've tried a bunch of different things, but it seems like they were wrong. I asked Rin-chan, but he won't teach me."

"Ah, really? I wonder why he wouldn't teach you."

It was surprising. She had thought that Rin was pretty concerned about Nagisa.

"Hey, what do you think I need to do to get better?"

Being asked so frankly made it hard to answer. Diving form wasn't something that Aki had given a lot of thought.

In her mind, Aki tried to picture herself when she dove. Standing on the starting block, moving her feet slightly apart, placing her thumbs on the edge. Folding her body, taking up a bent-forward stance and resting both hands on the edge of the starting block. Drawing her body in tightly, then releasing and springing out, her eyes on the goal.

When Aki got to that point, she realized that Nagisa had been staring at the place where he had landed on the water. It might not have mattered where he was looking, but somehow, Aki didn't feel that way. It wasn't easy to explain in words, but if she had to venture an explanation, maybe she would say that it looked like he was trying to find the goal he was aiming for. It wasn't a particularly logical answer, but she couldn't find any other suitable reply.

"Hey, what if you tried looking a little farther ahead when you dive?"

"How far ahead should I look?"

"Maybe pretend like you're trying to jump all the way to the far wall?"

"Hmm..."

Nagisa gazed at Aki with his big, round eyes. Being looked at with those eyes made a strange kind of regret spread through her chest. Giving him such a vague answer felt like cheating him, and she began to scold herself. Maybe it would have been better to honestly tell him that she didn't know.

While Aki was distracted thinking this, Nagisa had turned his eyes away.

"I get it. I'll give it a try,"

He said with a smile.

From the opposite side, Rin gave the signal to resume practice. Then he dove straight into the pool with a splash, and Nagisa headed over to the starting blocks.

Aki felt somehow relieved to be free of Nagisa. It wasn't that she disliked Nagisa. On the contrary, he gave off a sort of little-brotherly feeling, and it was impossible to let him be neglected. Even so, when she was being looked at with those direct eyes, she suddenly lost her confidence, and began to want to run away. It felt like little-brother Nagisa had turned into something that she didn't want to touch. It was as if her true self within herself was being laid bare before his eyes...

And Aki hated that self a little bit, for thinking about being free of Nagisa.



Nagisa jumped. Was he focusing his gaze on the goal? Was he going to be able to properly make a start that he'd be able to accept? As Aki was thinking about these things, she took a step toward the starting blocks, but then Rin called out to stop her as he got out of the pool.

"Yazaki-san, did you say something to Nagisa?"

Though he had been swimming the whole time, Rin wasn't even a bit out of breath. His tone wasn't accusatory, but Aki still felt a little awkward.

"Yeah, about diving."

Rin looked over his shoulder at Nagisa.

"I thought so. I was thinking that his start just now seemed a little different."

"It was where he was looking."

"Huh?"

"I told him it would be better to look at the goal while he's diving."

"Ah, so that was it."

"Matsuoka-kun, why didn't you teach him?"

Nagisa passed the twenty-five meter mark and accelerated.

"Nagisa isn't the type who gets faster by being shoved into a pattern. Stuff like logic and theories - even if his head understands them, he can't express them very well with his body. But if he feels something with his heart, it comes out clearly in his swimming. He doesn't seem to realize it himself, though."

Aki pulled on her goggles.

"I wonder if I said something unhelpful, then..."

"No, it should be fine. I think that what you told him is more about feelings, Yazaki-san. I think that telling Nagisa to swim with a certain feeling gets through to him much better than half-baked theories. Honestly."

"Yeah."

Aki nodded, and then went to stand on the starting block. She moved her feet slightly apart and placed her thumbs on the edge. She folded her body, taking up a bent-over stance. She placed both her hands on the starting block and waited for

Yuuki. She drew her body in tightly, then released and sprang out, her eyes on the goal.

As she hung in the air, Aki tried to look honestly into her heart.

*Can I face swimming with my honest feelings, the way Nagisa does?*

She hated herself a little bit for not being able to give anything but an uncertain answer when she asked. Hating the fact that she was even now avoiding the subject as well, Aki splashed into the surface of the water.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Team*

Some kind of sprouts slowly started to grow in the graduation project's flower bed. The girls had sown the seeds, but it seems like it was a secret from the boys as to what kind of seeds they were. Like Makoto said, perhaps they're flowers that'll bloom by the time of the graduation ceremony. It can't possibly be in time for it, though.

He looks up at the cherry blossom tree. There aren't any flower buds on it yet. It didn't seem like Rin's wish of wanting to swim in the pool with cherry blossom petals dancing in it would come true, either.

When he looks down at his feet, the light brown ground stretched out. He wonders if the cherry blossom's roots spread deep down underneath the ground. How does it feel to have something like a flower bed planted over its roots that took many years to spread? If he was the cherry blossom, how would he feel?

After considering that, a bitter smile surfaced. If he were the cherry blossom, he surely wouldn't feel anything. Something like a flower bed wouldn't catch his attention. He wouldn't be bewildered by or shunning it. As long as he could spread his large branches towards the sky, he wouldn't wish for anything else.

When he thinks about how he was the only one fussing over it, if the cherry blossom in question didn't even worry about it, he ended up smiling a little.

"Are you so happy that the buds came out? Haru."

Before he knew it, Rin and Makoto were standing right beside him.

"Not really."

He didn't intend to explain to Rin what he was thinking about. Nevertheless, denying it is bothersome, too. So, he replied like that.

"The graduation is soon, huh."

Makoto says it like he's deeply moved, while looking up at the cherry blossom.

"It really is. A farewell to the school filled with memories, too."

Like a terrible actor, Rin spoke out at random. He won't be nice enough to reply to every little thing. Like Makoto would.

"Still, it's only been two months. Shouldn't you go to the graduation ceremony at your old school?"

Rin's smile suddenly turns cold. Dropping his gaze on the flower bed, he stares at the little sprouts.

"I've properly bid farewell to Sano Elementary."

With a performance that was a little bit better for a terrible actor, he creates an expression that holds grief in it.

"Sorry. I said something unnecessary."

Makoto reacts again. Even if it wasn't acting, though it wasn't something to worry so much about, either.

"Don't worry about it. It's in the past now. I'm a part of Iwatobi Elementary now, too."

"That's right. We'll graduate together, right?"

After going as far as saying that, Makoto's smile clouded over a little. His glance facing Rin, looking like he's trying to say something, he hesitates.

"What?"

To Makoto's glance, Rin asks back.

"Yeah, I was concerned a little. You didn't come to yesterday's orientation, did you?"

It's about the middle school orientation. There were explanations about the uniform, textbooks, club activities and so on. However, Rin wasn't there.

Rin looks up at the cherry blossom that doesn't have its flower buds yet. The sunlight piercing through between the branches made him narrow his eyes.

"It's because, I'm not going to middle school here."

Haruka turns his gaze towards Rin. Unable to judge whether it's a joke or he's being serious, he attempted to read the true meaning from Rin's expression. However, just by the sunlight filtering through the trees creating patterns on Rin's face as he's looking up at the cherry blossom's branches or the sky, he couldn't read out anything. Facing the cherry blossom, Haruka decided to wait for Makoto's words. In such cases, what Haruka wants to ask, Makoto asks for him instead.

“What do you mean by that? Why didn't you say anything? We're on the same team. Aren't we friends?”





He didn't ask where he's going and what he's intending to do. Perhaps being on the same team is more important than anything else to Makoto. So, he only reproached him in the question of feelings, namely why he didn't say anything.

It's something Haruka can't say at all. Things like 'team' or 'friends'. Accepting those very easily, Makoto ends up putting it into words. To the point that Haruka becomes embarrassed over what Makoto asks.

"I wasn't keeping it a secret. The destination was decided yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

He can't fathom the conversation at all. Things like 'yesterday' and 'destination'. To begin with, they don't discuss any of the crucial things, like why is he changing schools, why is he attempting to involve Haruka and Makoto, why is he so obsessed with the relay.

Hiding his face slightly that seemed to be made radiant, Rin spoke in a mutter.

"I'm going to Australia."

"By Australia, you mean overseas?"

Makoto asks something stupid. Of course it's overseas. There's no such place in Japan. And then, from the flow of the conversation, it doesn't seem like he's going on a trip.

"I handed in the application for studying abroad to several schools, but yesterday, the receiving side was finally settled."

Makoto was bewildered. With his mouth opened a little like he was attempting to say something, he tenses. Surely, countless words are going back and forth in his head.

"I transferred here after it was decided that I'm going to Australia. I thought I'd tell everyone where I'm going once it had been properly settled. I didn't want to cause trouble for everyone, upsetting them halfway through."

—— What a selfish guy.

Haruka grinded his molars, feeling such an anger that he couldn't hold back. He already upset them enough and he keeps causing trouble.

".....Sorry."

Rin muttered in a small voice, perhaps he had guessed Haruka's feelings.

The wind that clearly had the scent of spring in it coils around Haruka. He thought that he wanted to hurry up and swim. He thought that he wanted to hurry up and shake off this sickly sweet wind. Then, he thought that he wanted to hurry up and be released from the ties of this incomprehensible guy.

From the countless words going back and forth in his head, Makoto finally found a short question.

"Why are you going to Australia?"

"To study swimming."

He returned a minimum necessary response to the short question.

As he stood face to face with the cherry blossom, Haruka asked Rin.

"What do you want to do?"

It was a voice that seemed to lose, even to the wind that was and wasn't there.

"I want to become..... an Olympic swimmer."

He can't smile. He can become whatever he wants. But that's not what Haruka wanted to hear. It's always like that. Hiding things about himself, he always says selfish things. And now, too, while saying very self-centered things in front of Haruka—, he stood under the cherry blossom.

Raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, with his eyes widened, Makoto blinked once, like he remembered something.

"When are you going?"

"The day.... after the tournament."

"Then, we don't have any days left of swimming together."

Makoto looks at Haruka. Even while he realizes that he's being watched, he stayed silent, facing the cherry blossom.

— How does Haru feel? What are his true feelings?

Getting a feeling that that's what Makoto's look is asking, he couldn't directly look at him. Feeling an anger with no outlet, trapping it inside his chest, at last he could suppress the impulse to run away from here. He wants to hurry up and slip his body into the water. The water will release Haruka from the unnecessary ties.

—I want to hurry up and escape into the water.

Haruka's pulse jumped higher. The blood throughout his body flows rapidly. The area around his temples heating up, his palms start to sweat.

—Was I..... running away?

Perhaps he wanted to escape into the water. Seeking to feel at ease, averting his eyes from the real world, perhaps he wanted to escape into the water for the sake of hiding his true feelings.

Without becoming one body or repressing it with force, they were supposed to mutually recognize each other's existence. Feeling sufficiency from that recognition, perhaps he was only depending on it. Perhaps he was swimming for the sake of that.

He wanted to deny it. He strongly wanted to deny it. However, the more he thought about it, the more it heavily weighed down on Haruka as the undeniable truth.

He doesn't know what he should do anymore. The moment he realized that he was depending on the water, his self that should have been standing tall, it seemed like it was about to crumble down. While his two feet become thinner and more brittle, seeming like they'll break, they finally supported Haruka.

— That can't be!

They're the feet that ran, dove and swam until now. They couldn't be that weak. While thinking that, he couldn't hold back the faint trembling of his feet.

He looks at Makoto. He was still asking Haruka a question.

—What are your true feelings?

Before, Makoto had told Haruka that he's running away from the water. Exposing himself like that, if he were to honestly admit it, perhaps he could feel at ease a little.

The lukewarm spring breeze wraps up Haruka. It didn't have the harshness of winter anymore. Neither blowing through strongly, nor being freezing. There's no need to endure it. He should be honest. That's what it whispered to Haruka.

He won't be tempted by something like that. No matter when and where, he always wants to be himself. He wants to keep being his strong self. Clenching his teeth, he'll stand by himself. He mustn't run away from here. There's no way he could approve of his weak self. He has to keep being strong. To the end, he has to be himself.

Makoto's eyes ask him again.

— How does Haru feel?

He doesn't answer. He can't answer. Where Rin is going, what he's becoming, is an unrelated matter to him. It can't change the fact that he's standing in front him, on the same team. And, he didn't intend to change his feelings that had decided to swim in the relay, either. So he'll swim. He'll swim it. Under no circumstances will he run away. For the sake of continuing to be his strong self.

".....Fine."

Haruka's voice drifts about, riding the spring-like wind.

"Haru?"

Furrowing his eight-shaped eyebrows, Makoto anxiously looked at Haruka.

"In the next tournament."

That's all Haruka said, turning his gaze towards Rin. His eyes widening, Rin turns to face Haruka from the front.

"Are you sure? You'll narrow it down to just the relay?"

His voice quickly leaks out from the tip of his mouth. What an endlessly cunning guy. Words that must still compensate should've been necessary. That ending up decoding his heart like it saw through it, Haruka lost the following words. Feeling irritated from Rin making an expression like he knows everything, he tightly grinds his molars once.

However, he won't run away anymore. That's what he decided. Not from the relay, not from Rin, and not from himself, either——. Therefore, he didn't intend to back out of it now.

"Will you really swim in the relay only?"

Rin pressures the boring idea.

"That's what I intended to say."

While turning back to the cherry blossom, he said so spluttering it out.

Rin's happy expression stopping at the edge of his vision, it irritates Haruka again.

"Alright! Well then, I'll show Haru a sight he's never seen before?"

"A sight he's never seen before.....?"

"Yeah, an extraordinary sight that can't be seen unless it's the four of us!"

Before they knew it, the sun had changed its angle a little. Piercing through the complicatedly twisting branches, a strong light shines on Haruka's face. He doesn't look up the way Rin does, he just narrows his eyes a little.

Makoto stared at Haruka like a child who had gotten lost. He believes to have answered Makoto's question. All he has to do now is think about it on his own. He didn't want to force him or have expectations for him like Rin. Makoto should think about it for himself, find an answer and act according to it. Not because he's thrusting him away or to make him coldhearted. He just thinks that as long as it's what Makoto has decided, it will be the most correct choice.

".....Haru."

Like the dead leaves fluttering about in the wind, Makoto speaks in a helpless voice.

"Could I see it, too? That sight."

It's something he should ask from Rin. What he wants to show, or what he himself wants to see, Haruka himself doesn't know.

"I want to see it, too, Rin. I want to swim with everyone."

While a smile shows on his face, Rin bumps his fist on Makoto's shoulder.

"You called me Rin for the first time. It's all right, if it's us, surely."

Makoto nods, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows.

They heard a small bird's chirping voice coming from somewhere. Perhaps it's that bird, soaring while drawing a trail on the clear sky. As if it's aiming for the goal that's in the endless distance.



"Well then."

While snapping his goggles into place, Rin stood onto the starting block with light steps.

Haruka, Makoto and Nagisa haven't arrived yet. The last class ending in the morning, splitting into two groups to prepare the graduation ceremony and to do the big cleaning from the afternoon, they could go home depending on when they finished the work. Haruka and Makoto were in the graduation ceremony

preparation group, it seemed like it's still taking them some time. As for Nagisa, he probably has afternoon classes as usual.

So, this means that he finally got time to swim alone.

While looking at the clock's hand to match his timing, Rin kicked off from the starting block. Dolphin kick from landing on the water. Then, stroke. It's not butterfly. It's forward crawl.

There's something that has always been bothering him. At the tournaments where he was matched against Haruka, he never once won on 100m. Since Haruka only entered free on the long lane, there were times when he didn't swim with Rin, they generally competed in the two events of 50m and 100m. Sometimes he won on 50m, but no matter what, he couldn't win at 100m.

It was exactly a year ago when he first swam with Haruka. Since he didn't think that he would lose in the city tournament, when he was overtaken, to be honest, he got hasty. From that point on, he was far from catching up no matter how much he swam, he just kept on being separated.

Thanks to the pressure of Haruka's energy gaining on him and the restlessness after being overtaken, when he reached the goal, he had completely exhausted his physical strength. In any case, climbing out of the pool at last, afterwards, he ended up lying down without taking off his goggles.

He lost to Makoto in breaststroke, too, but it wasn't like this. This is a first. That pressure and restlessness. His swimming was flawless. In fact, he even produced a good time. But even so, he lost. Simultaneously as the question of 'why' ran around in his head, the irritation he felt towards something he couldn't understand swirled in his chest.

—— Damn it. Haa. He's fast. Haa. Who is it?

While stretching out his arms and legs, among his interrupted breathing, that's what he muttered.

Rin's time goes up with each tournament. However, Haruka's went even higher. By the time Rin catches up to the previous time, Haruka advances even more ahead. He always harbored in his chest the feeling that's more than anxiety and restlessness, that he won't be able to catch up for all eternity at this rate. For the sake of freely concentrating on the relay as well, he at least wanted to catch up to Haruka's previous time.

His turn is sharp, small and powerful.



He diligently checks the form and timing. The point that becomes a problem is nowhere to be found. Even so, when he looks at the clock after reaching the goal, of course he was late. He knows that it's not in the difference of physique and muscle strength. Rather, Rin's faster at the start and turn. Given that, all that's left is the rolling or the 'feet flexibility'.

This was the most troublesome. The ideal 'feet flexibility' can't be defined. A full length rolling from the arm's stroke and to the handling of the back, all of it operating well together is connected to the first ideal 'feet flexibility'. Therefore, no matter how much you think about just your feet, you'll never be able to swim faster, and a precise answer can't possibly exist, either. Trying it out, finding it, getting used to it, making it your thing is the only way. Supposing that Haruka has obtained that ideal 'feet flexibility', if that's the case——, the restlessness wells up again as he thinks about that. Or could Haruka's swimming be the ideal form that Rin is seeking? It's not the current Haruka. It's the Haruka from before.

While thinking about this and that, Rin climbed onto the poolside.

"Well then."

Getting up on the starting block again while snapping his goggles into place, he looked at the clock. Matching the timing, he dives in. It seemed like he could do about thirty more. If his physical strength can hold out, that is.



After practice ended, Gou stood at Iwatobi SC's exit, holding a large paper bag. She's Rin's little sister.

"Gou.....!"

"Ah, Onii-chan."

She turns towards him with a carefree smile. She's a fifth grader, one year below. Turning around to the sound of the automatic door, Haruka and the others were just coming out, too. Noticing Kou, to show his curiosity in his usual fashion, Nagisa goes over to her.

"Hey, who are you? Rin-chan's friend?"

Before Rin answers, Kou gushes out.

“Onii-chan, you’re ‘Rin-chan’ here, too.”

“Wh-what are you saying? Actually, why are you here!?”

Without replying to Rin’s question, Gou quickly bowed her head towards Haruka and the others.

“I’m Matsuoka Gou. My older brother is always taking care of me.”

Haruka turns his eyes towards Makoto. Meaning ‘I’ll leave the rest to you’.

“Hello. I’m Tachibana Makoto. This is Hazuki Nagisa, this is Nanase Haruka.”

Nagisa smiles at her with a ‘nice to meet you’, Haruka awkwardly nods his head in greeting.

“Ah, I heard. You’re swimming in the relay the day after tomorrow, right? I heard about it. He always said ‘Nanase’s fast, Nanase’s fast’ after a tournament.”

“O-oi, Gou! Mind your own business!”

Embarrassed, he couldn’t show his face to Haruka.

“But, I’m glad. That you’re swimming together. It was worth it to change his resident’s card to Grandma’s house and come here. Mom was worried. He suggested changing schools on his own all of a sudden.”

“That’s enough out of you, shut up!”

Before she could tell any more unnecessary things, when he attempted to quickly drive her away, the meddlesome Makoto asked Gou.

“Did you come here for something?”

“Yeah. I brought this.”

He saw a fleeting glimpse of the paper bag’s contents that Gou holds out. Realizing that it’s a tin of cookies, Rin frets.

“Idiot, you shouldn’t have brought that here!”

Rin hid it with his body so that the others wouldn’t see.

“But, you’re using it here, right?”

“That’s true, I asked Mom to take it Grandma’s house. I didn’t hear about you coming.”

“But, Mom told me to bring it since you’re using it here anyways——“

"There's no point in bringing it here now, is there? I'll bring it on Sunday."

"But it'll be more baggage——"

"It's fine. More baggage or whatever. In any case, take it back to Grandma's house!"

"Hey, what's that?"

When he turns around, Nagisa was attempting to peek into it, making his big round eyes sparkle.

"It's nothing. It has nothing to do with you!"

He pushes Nagisa back.

"Sunday's the day of the tournament, right? Are you using it for the match?"

Surprisingly, he's sharp when it comes to something like this.

"I'm not using it, it's not related."

"Then, after the match? For the commemoration photographing?"

"Wrong, I said it's not related."

"After the photographing? Ah, I got it!"

"Got wh-what?"

"Is it something to eat? After the tournament, you're holding a 'tried-our-best party'. What could it be? If it's three days before it, rice cookies or cookies maybe?"

He was shocked. He didn't guess right, but he's close.

"Onii-chan, are you holding a 'tried-our-best party'? Can I come, too?"

"I'm not! I mean, either way, you have to go home today."

"I'm with Mom at Grandma's place until Sunday."

"What about school?"

"The graduation ceremony is tomorrow at Sano Elementary, too. Since the fifth graders are only in half of it, I'm taking a break. So Mom and I are going to see the graduation ceremony. The tournament after it, too."

"It's fine. You don't have to come and see."

"There's school on Monday, seeing you off——"

"I'm going home."

Haruka starts running after saying it. After lightly waving his hand to Gou, Makoto started running too.

"Bye."

After waving his hand at Gou, Nagisa runs after them, too.

"See you later."

Turning his back to Gou while feeling relieved, Rin ran after them, too. Joining up with the three of them, when they were about to pass through the fishing harbor, Gou shouted after them in a large voice.

"Onii-chaan, there's 'su-ki-ya-ki' tonight."

Makoto letting out a puff, Nagisa saying 'how nice', they're envious. Casting his eyes down, Rin dropped his speed and took just three steps back.

He didn't want to talk to anyone anymore. Rin was keenly taught the lesson that one's family is so embarrassing.



Haruka was perplexed. He thought that a graduation ceremony was something that would end more quickly. That as they had practiced countless times, they'd advance indifferently, receive their certificates and just digest the ceremony. And yet, he surely didn't expect that the dozens of people crying before his eyes would make him perplexed. Furthermore, the first one to break the dam was Rin. Haruka couldn't understand at all why a guy who's been there for merely two months is crying, what shook his emotions so much. To sympathize with Rin, who's crying with his voice raised, when everyone started crying one by one, Haruka could only look on silently, ending up completely left behind.

It was also surprising that Makoto didn't show any tears among them. Not because he's particularly easily moved to tears, he wasn't the type who couldn't control his feelings either, but despite most of the class crying, he couldn't help feeling that it was unnatural for Makoto to be composed.

The graduation ceremony of tears didn't end even when they returned to the classroom, it went on and on until they bid farewell to the cherry blossom and the flower bed.



Is the wind blowing on Mutsukibashi again today? But it probably doesn't blow with intense coldness anymore. Is Kotsuzumiyama growing taller again? Glowing in the blue sky, while making the lines of the mountain ridge vividly rise to the surface.

While running lined up to Makoto, before he could think about those things, he started sweating before he knew it. Today's temperature was high enough to be remindful of early summer.

In the vicinity of the bridge, he saw Nagisa stepping in place. And then the sound of footsteps getting closer from behind. He knows it's Rin without having to turn around.

Rin never calls out from behind. He always stays silent until he lines up beside them. It seems that he's under the arbitrary impression that Haruka hates being suddenly prodded and treated over-familiarly.

"Hey."

Pausing his breathing, Rin shows a smile. Sending him a fleeting look, Haruka let Rin know just that he hears him.

"Yahhoo."

Nagisa rushed over while waving his hand.

"Hey Haru-chan. Did you cry today?"

The graduation ceremony ended in the morning. That's why they decided to practice at the club in the afternoon. Makoto notified Nagisa.

"I don't cry."

"Really? Even though it's the graduation ceremony?"

Finding Nagisa's way of think that you have to cry just because it's the graduation ceremony to be amusing, his lips come close to relaxing.

"Rin-chan's the one who cried."

"Hold on a sec, it wasn't just me. Most of the class was crying. There's something wrong with Makoto and Haruka for not crying. Also, I told you to stop with 'Rin-chan'. Call me 'leader', Haru."

He thinks that he's a bothersome guy. Crying aloud so much, it's too late for excuses now.

"Sure, leader."

Rin glares at Haruka.

"..... As I thought, when Haru calls me that, it kinda gets on my nerves. Just call me Rin."

They approach the bridge while having a trifling conversation. The wind didn't blow from the mountain, it held the smell of salt water. Riding on that wind, a tern flew in the calm sky.

Nagisa runs getting close to Makoto.

"Hey, Mako-chan didn't cry either?"

"Yeah. Since Rin was crying in a large voice, I was surprised, it ended up kind of breaking the mood."

"Eeh, you really didn't cry? But then, why did Rin-chan cry? He just came here though. Could it possibly be because he's going to Australia?"

Unlike himself, Rin replies while getting embarrassed.

"It's like, I can't handle that kind of mood. Though the time we spent together was short, it was a good class. Hey, why do you know that I'm going to Australia?"

"I heard from Mako-chan yesterday. But, Rin-chan, you're a crybaby, huh?"

When Rin swallowed his breath as he was about to say something, Haruka raised his speed a little.

"I'm gonna leave you behind if you chatter."

The other three raise their pace to match up with Haruka. Before they became aware of it, Nagisa didn't fall behind them. While breathing in a well-regulated rhythm, he keeps up in a light gait. It's not because he suddenly got muscle strength or he grew taller. It's just that he cleared the conditions for the sake of running faster a little. But he probably hasn't noticed it himself.



The tern passes by Haruka and the others, it returns to the sea. Without being taught how to fly, as long as it has the requirements for flying from birth, can it fly with just that? Haruka's thoughts melted into the blue sky, together with the tern.



Makoto let go of his grip at the same time as he strongly kicked the wall. Rapidly stretching up in an instant, the scene immediately changes to underwater. So that the flutter kick gains enough buoyancy, he's aware of the downkick. For the upkick, he lightly kicks upward.

While starting the strokes, he rises to the water's surface. He didn't need a breather, but he inhales a breath with the recovery's timing. If his breathing were to be disordered, it would end up connecting to disturbing his form at once.

He hasn't swum the backstroke in an actual match before. So, even though it was just before the tournament, he didn't feel nervous at all. To what extent he should swim for it to be accepted, to what extent it is now, he didn't know at all. As long as he doesn't know anything, he's not anxious, either. As long as he's not anxious, there's no point in being nervous. He was only feeling exhilarated.

During the graduation ceremony, even though everyone was crying, he didn't cry with them because he couldn't cry. Until the ceremony began, he thought that he would surely end up crying. However, during the ceremony and after it, true feelings didn't gush forth at all.

— It's not over yet.

That feeling restrained the other emotions.

It's not over yet. The best race still awaits. Swimming it with these members, the best race made the last still awaits. He can't possibly cry if it's not even over yet. He can't possibly cry while he has this exhilarated feeling. There's no anxiety, expectation or anything at all. There was only the passion that was enough to get him excited now.

Makoto's hand firmly extending and touching the wall, Nagisa dives in.



Thinking that he passed under too deep, Nagisa rushed to correct his trajectory. One pull and one kick.

His time went up. He feels that it's real, too. He has become capable of grasping the feeling of kicking the mass of the water on the sole of his feet. The resistance's heavy impact is transmitted from the sole of his feet.

But if you were to ask him if he could compete against sixth graders, to be honest, he didn't have the confidence yet. It's the same with the dive. Although there were times when he thought it went well, there are also times when it doesn't, like now. On the other hand of being glad that he can swim with everyone, sometimes he worried if he was becoming a hindrance. Anxiety always standing in front of him, he feels a pain in his chest.

—That's why I want to swim faster.

When those feelings become stronger, his body became lighter without fail. The resistance transmitting through the sole of his feet getting bigger, it rapidly stretches. Simultaneously, the water's propulsive force getting bigger as well, it forces him back like a wall.

While turning his awareness towards the other side of that wall, Nagisa stretched out both his hands so that he could pierce through it.



Rin kicked off from the starting block. He makes the landing on the water at an ideal angle. Spreading his arms wide from the dolphin kick, he starts the butterfly.

In the end, without attaining the 'ideal feet bending' yesterday, he finished practicing the forward crawl. He couldn't overtake Haruka's time. Getting a feeling that he was lacking something fundamental, he ended up giving up on it after swimming twenty laps. He was physically at his limit, too, time wise it was almost time for the other members to arrive, he thought that beyond that, it would be the same no matter how much he swam.

In other words, the fundamental element is the ideal image. It's impossible to become faster without depicting an image and just recklessly aiming only at the time. And Rin's depicted ideal image is Haruka. However, the way Haruka was now, he couldn't possibly become anything like an ideal.



It's been over two weeks since they narrowed practice down to the medley relay. Despite this, the team's results are far from improving. Their time isn't going up at all. No, to say nothing of going up, it dropped. Haruka was the cause. He no longer swam gracefully like before.

If you examine the form in detail, the point that's becoming a problem is nowhere to be found, but in his stroke and kick, it wasn't functioning at all as a propulsive force. While carving a clumsy rhythm, he just kept swimming.

Rin didn't attempt to say anything about it. Rather, there was no point in giving advice. Like a water bird spreading its wings and gliding in the sky, he swims without even feeling water's resistance. Such as that way of swimming was largely out of Rin's area of expertise.

Now, Haruka struggled in the water like a different person. Brushing away the water coiling around him, he attempts to go ahead by force. Differing from Makoto's powerfulness, he just recklessly aimed at the goal. Rejecting the water, it even seemed like he hates it. Does it have a purpose, or is he injured, or did he really end up forgetting how to swim? In any case, it became a way of swimming that didn't bear the slightest resemblance to what Haruka's was until now.

Now that he lost sight of the ideal image, Rin didn't even know what he should be struggling towards anymore. So long as Haruka is in his current state, he can't pursue the ideal. While that may be true, he didn't intend to ask Haruka why that is, either. It wouldn't change anything even if he asked, even if nothing can be done about it at this rate, he thought that he doesn't mind. There's no change in his feelings that decided to swim on the same team.

However, Haruka will one day surely break out of this situation. He doesn't know when this will happen. Will he make it in time for the tournament, or will it be way ahead..... In any case, he'll certainly break out, he will become faster without a doubt. Unless he becomes faster, there's no meaning in having suffered and worried.

But when Rin wonders if Haruka will go ahead of him again like this, he becomes unable to stand it after all. Even when he thinks that he's gotten closer, he ends up being separated again. No matter how much time passes, he won't reach him. No matter how much time passes, he'll keep swimming in front of him.

— Why is it always him.....

Clenching his teeth, he finished swimming the 100m while strongly striking the water.



Haruka leaps in. The moment he leapt, he thought that it's no good. Landing on the water. Then, he starts doing the strokes, unable to catch the rhythm. Strength fills his body. He becomes stiff. Even though he knows that he can't swim properly in that case, it was already hopeless. He couldn't swim any other way anymore.

Telling himself that he can't do anything about it now, he forcibly convinces himself. Lets himself give up. Lets himself compromise.

He lies to himself, saying that it's fine like this now. Deceives himself. Keeps fooling himself.

While tormenting himself with a helpless feeling of restlessness and self-hatred, Haruka still kept swimming.

Until just about two weeks before, he didn't even care about his time. And then, after he began caring about his time, the water ended up being nothing but water to Haruka. Physically existing, becoming a target of buoyancy to obtain, it turned into nothing more than an obstacle that became a hindrance of propulsion. Then, doing a rolling according to the textbook, he repeats the strokes. It's a basic swimming against the water as a substance. The connection between Haruka and the water turned into something no more than that.

Touching the goal as the fourth swimmer, Haruka confirms the time as he lifts his face from the water's surface. The mediocre number that's no different from usual lined up mechanically. A small sound leaks out from the gap between his molars as he lightly grits his teeth.

Aki extended her hand to Haruka, who had taken off his goggles.

"Good job."

Wondering if she's imitating Makoto's tone of voice, he speaks in a voice like his throat was crushed a little.

"Thanks."

Holding on to Aki's hand, he climbed up onto the poolside. The size and pulling strength of the grasping hand was different from Makoto's. Taking off his cap and shaking his head, he asked while making the water come out of his ears.

"How's your team doing?"

"Yeah, our time is smoothly going up."

"I see, you're trying your best."

He wasn't very interested, but it felt awkward to wave her hand away without saying anything. That's all it is. While that may be true, he doesn't intend to give a report about themselves, like social rules dictate.

"It feels kind of weird to meet again after graduating, doesn't it?"

Aki shows a carefree smile.

"Come April, most of us all will be in the same middle school."

"Yeah, that's true. But crying so much and saying goodbye, it's kind of embarrassing a little to meet again so easily."

He thinks it's typical of Aki. To Haruka, the graduation ceremony was just a ceremony, it didn't have any other special meaning. If there's something that largely differs between Haruka and Aki, it's probably the way they hold their awareness for their friends. It's not just Aki. Haruka was different from everyone else. Showing that at the time of the graduation ceremony, to the point of saying that it's unpleasant, he ended up being perplexed.

"That's because it was a good class."

Unable to bring himself to let go of Aki's hand, he tries imitating Rin's words.

"Yeah. It really was a good class. We can't laugh and cry with those members anymore, can we?"

The 'member' keyword rolls around in Haruka's ears. It doesn't pass through easily like other words.

"That's right."

He thought of ending the conversation with those short words. He looks at Rin taking a break on the bench in a fleeting glance. He was talking to Makoto about something. It doesn't seem like they're resuming practice yet. As a last resort, Haruka attempted to change the direction his body was facing, intending to say so himself.

"Nanase-kun."

When he slightly moved the toes of his right foot, Aki called Haruka to halt. When he turned his gaze towards her, Aki looked embarrassed.

"Saying to Nanase-kun that it would be better if he swam in the relay, that is, um, I'm sorry."

Saying that, she slowly bowed her head. What could she be apologizing for? Though he stared at Aki bowing her head, he couldn't find the answer.

"Why?"

He had no choice but to ask that. Or, would it have been better if he had pretended to know and said 'it doesn't matter'?

Aki raises her head.

"You see, I mistakenly believed without consideration that Nanase-kun needed friends to mutually rely and be relied on, to cry and laugh with. I always thought that friends are that sort of thing. But I realized that it was just my selfish assumption. Nanase-kun has his own feelings, teams and friends come in many shapes, right? Really, it feels like unnecessary meddling. Nanase-kun and the others, all of you are so serious, all of you looking straight ahead at swimming, seeing Nanase-kun and the others like that, it made me feel a little ashamed..... Aah, why did I say something like that? You didn't understand any of that, huh..... But you see, I think it's the same. Our feelings and Nanase-kun and the others' feelings, I want to think that they're the same. Along with everyone on the team, there's difficulty and pain facing the same objective, having to overcome that sort of thing, there's impatience and something like worry, too..... So you see, when I see Nanase-kun and the others putting in all their effort, I feel the strength welling up that I have to try my best, too. Really, it always encourages me."

Aki softly drops her gaze on the pool.

Haruka wondered if it would be better if he said something, but without knowing what he should say, he could only fixedly stare at Aki casting her eyes down. Aki's words fly past each other in his head like fragments. None of them pass easily through his ears. And he couldn't easily accept any of them.

He doesn't understand what sort of meaning there is to the relay. He doesn't know yet what waits ahead of it, either. It's because he didn't know that he agreed to become a member. And now, he's swimming. That's all it was. It's not that he's swimming particularly for the sake of encouraging someone.



How did Aki interpret Haruka's silence? With her gaze still turned towards the pool, a faint smile rose to the surface. Her mouth opens a little.

"You see, swimming is really fun for me now."

Raising her gaze, Aki peeks at Haruka's eyes. Like she's trying to search for the true Haruka in the depths of his eyes.

—How does Nanase-kun feel?

Aki throws the same thing at him as Makoto asked under the cherry blossom at that time. As he tried replying that he doesn't really know, the words got stuck inside his throat. And then, meaningless words rush out of his mouth instead.

"I see, let's both try our best."

"Yeah."

Lightly raising his hand, he turned his back towards Aki. Aki's smile disappearing from his field of vision, only the word 'fun' remained in his ear. Swimming and having thought that it's 'fun' — it has probably never happened before. Could that be waiting for him beyond the relay?

He walks to the bench where Rin and the others are sitting. He wondered how much they had swam today when he saw Nagisa breathing into his back. How is it for Nagisa? Like Aki, is he having fun swimming? How is it for Rin? For Makoto.....?

Because the sun had gone down a little, the light shining in from the skylight windows makes rectangular sunny spots in the pool. While looking at the light diffusedly reflecting on the ripples, Haruka vaguely remembered that tomorrow is the day of the tournament.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Race*

It was a very sunny day since morning. While Haruka looked up at the blue sky, he wondered how many times it's been that he's come here. The Hiyori Swimming Stadium was an especially big venue even in the prefecture, the sports meets were usually held here. When you come to this venue, it feels like it's always sunny. He thought that it was better that it was sunny, even though it didn't really matter if it was sunny or not because of the indoor pool.

"The weather's nice again today, huh?"

As usual, Makoto's voice is cheerful. On a sunny day, he especially thinks so.

"Wow, it's huge."

Having come here for the first time, Nagisa looks up at it, round-eyed with amazement.

And then, Rin is extremely taciturn. Could he be nervous? Though it's not in his character.

When Rin writes down the four names at the reception desk, the person in charge took out the girls' list and started comparing it. He wondered if Rin will say something, but he just silently watched them do the work. Since the person in charge searched until the end of the list but the names weren't there, doubtfully raising their head, they start to say something. But seeing Rin and the other's faces and showing an attitude of understanding, they began to look for the boys' list.

While walking in the corridor leading to the locker room, Nagisa burst into laughter that he was suppressing at once.

"Hey, did you see? The person just now, he ended up taking out the girls' list. I wonder which name he thought was a girl's? It has to be Rin-chan."

"Wrong. It's everyone's."

"By everyone, you mean me too?"

"Yes. You too."

"Eeh. But I don't know any girl named 'Nagisa'. I saw a Rinrin at the zoo before, though. It was female."

Haruka somehow managed to hold back, but Makoto doubled over in laughter. While looking at Makoto in a sidelong glance, Rin speaks, seeming displeased.

"If you let your mind wander, you'll end up losing. Pull yourselves together a little."

"Yeees."

Do they understand or not? For now, it felt like in Nagisa's response that at least Rin's nervousness was conveyed.



As they enter the changing rooms, they heard the sound of lockers opening and shutting coming from here and there. A considerable amount of people are already gathered. As Rin opens a locker within reach, the other three also opened doors, searching for an empty locker nearby.

"Rin."

When he turns around after his name is called, some people heading on their way to the pool were looking at Rin. Rin's cheeks unintentionally soften. They're members of Sano SC, that he belonged to before.

"Hey, it's been a while."

When he responds lightly waving his hand, one of them approached with a friendly smile. It's Yamazaki Sousuke. He's tall and thin as ever.

"You look like you're doing well."

"Well yeah. What about you?"

"Same as usual, I guess. That aside, did you get to meet your father?"

Being asked that question, Rin is bewildered.

"Aah, well."

While being aware of Haruka and the others, he gave a vague answer.

"I see. See you later, then."

Seeming to have guessed the circumstances based on Rin's state, Sousuke left the locker room, quickly cutting short the conversation. Then, only a strange silence remained.

Without anyone chatting about anything, they changed their clothes in silence. Having finished changing first, Nagisa makes a snapping sound with the goggles' rubber, imitating Rin.

"I'm first."

Like always, as he says it in a carefree voice, the stagnant air ended up disappearing, like fog clearing up.

"Then, I'm second."

Makoto says while closing the locker, looking at each other with Nagisa, they laughed.

Nagisa asked Rin.

"Hey, how many rounds are we swimming today?"

"One round."

"Then, tomorrow?"

"It's only the case if we place within the top 16 overall of today's race, but then we swim in the semifinal, and if we place in the top 8 overall, then we're in the finals."

"Then, we have to win three times, right?"

"That's right. Well, for now, it'll be fine if we aim for no less than 4th within the group today."

After saying it, he thinks that it was a weak-spirited remark. It's possible that somewhere in his heart, it's bothering him after all that the team's condition hasn't improved. He looks at Haruka. With his back turned towards Rin, he was attempting to close the locker's door. Haruka had to have heard it, too. Did Haruka also think that Rin is weak-spirited? And did he think that he was the cause of making Rin weak-spirited?

He wanted to tell him to not mind it, but without knowing how he should say it, Rin just intently stared at Haruka's back.



At the pool, they held each contest by order of age. In every contest, the girls' race is before the boys'. And now, the girls' medley relay was being held among great cheers.

As the anchor, Aki stands on top of the starting block. In the preliminaries, each race becoming a close contest succeeding a close contest, Aki and the others' race also unfolded a fierce development that takes your breath away.

Simultaneously as Aki's feet kicks off from the starting block, the swimmer beside her also made the start. Landing on the water. And then, their heads simultaneously rise. Just like if they were doing synchronized swimming, the arms and legs of the forward crawl are matched. Then, just from right behind them, there was another swimmer gaining on them with tremendous force. It seemed like they were about to catch up just before the goal, but somehow getting away, she was able to pass through the preliminaries by arriving at almost the same time in second place. If there were 5m more, she would have certainly been overtaken. When she thinks that, chills ran down Aki's spine.

Aki and the other three started heading towards the locker room, without any of them chattering. In the passageway, they pass by the line of boys heading towards the starting positions.

"Congratulations, Zaki-chan."

Makoto held up the palm of his hand.

"Thanks. Good luck to you too, Tachibana-kun."

Aki passes by while hitting Makoto's hand and making a small snappy sound.

They came in second, but they couldn't slack off at all. The other three aren't smiling, either. Even though they practiced so much and raised their time, they weren't able to demonstrate its results enough. Those feelings weighed heavily on the four of them. Perhaps they were nervous? Perhaps they ended up straining themselves? Perhaps their form collapsed? Without knowing the cause, they grow anxious. If things go the same way they did today, they'll definitely end up being eliminated from the competition. When they think of that, they became hopelessly anxious.

However, no matter how anxious they become, even if they don't know the cause, there was only one thing to do tomorrow. It's a matter of swimming as they had practiced. And, if they can do that, it's a matter of believing that they'll certainly win. Taking a deep breath, Aki spoke in a voice as cheerful as possible.

"Good job, everyone. Let's try our best tomorrow, too."

The team got their smiles back from Aki's words.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Yeah yeah, it's tomorrow, right?"

"All right, we'll win the championship tomorrow!"

"We can absolutely do it. We've practiced so much. Let's try our best."

With everyone's smiles, a true smile returned to Aki's heart. Either bravado or pretending to be tough, anything is fine. If someone on the team has a cheerful mood, everyone cheers up. And then, everyone's cheer gives them their true smile. That's what a team is. That's the strength of a team. If they have that strength, even if they don't win tomorrow, even if they end up crying, perhaps they can think that they're glad to have been on this team. As unwavering confidence, that much was in Aki and the others' hearts.

While feeling a new energy rising, Aki began to walk, heading towards tomorrow.



While lightly loosening his body in front of the starting block, confirming that Makoto and Nagisa are in front of him, Rin felt it on his back that Haruka was behind him. He didn't especially have a reason to call out, but he wanted to be strongly conscious of the fact that he'll be swimming with these members from now.

Held on the short lane, they swim a total of 400m, one person 100m at a time. The first swimmer is Makoto, the second is Nagisa, the third is Rin, and then the anchor is Haruka. Called by the club name starting from the first lane, the first swimmer of the called team raises their hand and stands beside the starting block. Since the first swimmer is doing the backstroke, it becomes an underwater start.



After four short whistles were blown, Makoto enters the water on the long whistle. Holding his grip on the next long whistle, he pushes the sole of his feet against the wall.

“Take your marks!”

He pulls his body forward with a forceful push. A moment of silence. And then, a short buzzer sound——.

He leapt backward all at once. After landing on the water, he starts up his feet from a posture extending to kick. While breaking into the strokes, he rises to the water's surface. Makoto's head came up as first ahead. His figure that raises big splashes with powerful strokes, gives the impression of a marine creature.

Rin felt something that was different from before in Makoto's swimming. Not just in the crawl or the backstroke, he thinks that a fundamental part of his swimming is changing. Brushing aside the water, the forcefully advancing style hasn't changed, but the reckless way of going with all his strength was missing. In some way, perhaps it can even be called a powerful dreadfulness, while carrying a massive feeling like an orca or a whale because of it, he looked like he was swimming at ease. And, he has unmistakably gotten faster. Makoto might be attempting to evolve into a creature of the sea. While thinking about that, Rin stared at Makoto's swimming.

In top position, when Makoto touches the wall, Nagisa's both feet leapt off from the starting block. His leap is too high. Sinking as deep as much as he had leapt high, it ends up taking time to rise to the surface. In breaststroke, when your posture ends up breaking at the start, it becomes difficult to make a fine adjustment. The permitted movements underwater after the dive are just the one pull and one kick. After finally rising to the surface, Nagisa dropped their rank to second place. There's half a body difference with Sano SC.

—— Don't mind it, Nagisa. It's always like that. Your special ability is catching up in the second half.

While muttering in his mind, Rin stood at the starting block.

Sousuke stands beside Rin. During the time he was at Sano SC, their relation was having competed for being the representative, formerly they certainly had a relationship that could be called friends. When he said that he wanted to go Australia and when he said that he wanted to swim at Iwatobi SC, just saying 'I understand' while he was half shocked, he didn't try anything like half-heartedly keeping him back or pressing questions. Sousuke kept being someone who understood Rin well until the end. 'See you later.' 'Yeah.' That was their last conversation.

And now, Sousuke is standing in the line beside him as an arch-enemy.

"Sorry about earlier."

Sousuke says to Rin, his gaze facing ahead. He's directly apologizing for having made imprudent conversation.

"It doesn't matter."

Rin gives a short reply. He's saying that it's not a big deal. By merely exchanging only that much of a conversation, the two of them could return to the way they were several months before. And, they were able to mutually recognize that they're opponents who absolutely won't lose.

Rin takes up a crouching start posture. He's been testing this style since a month ago. It doesn't particularly raise his time, he couldn't prove that it's theoretically advantageous, either. In the process of searching for his own form, it's nothing more than one experiment that he ran into during his exploring for a solution. But, he felt the possibility. That is his entire reason.

In the end, without being able to shorten the difference, Nagisa touched the surface of the wall in 2nd place.

Sousuke making the start, Rin's foot leaps. The start isn't a contest of just kicking power. The real contest is how much they utilize that power as propulsion power. While being aware of the angle of landing on the water and the underwater posture, Rin raised splashes on the water's surface.

Sousuke goes a little in front of Rin. While doing dolphin kicks, he lines up to Sousuke. He has perfectly left behind the other swimmers. From here, it becomes a contest just between two of them, against Sousuke. While rising to the surface, he starts the butterfly's stroke. At this point in time, Rin is in the lead by a little.

However, Sousuke demonstrates his specialty from here. If their difference were to widen like this, Rin wouldn't approve of him as an arch-enemy. Though his physique is lanky, making use of his long reach and bigger than average palm to the maximum, he forcefully chases after Rin.

The turn is almost simultaneous. Rin comes up ahead again. And then, Sousuke gains on him.

— Being hasty is no good. I mustn't put strength into my shoulders. I have to transmit my entire body's flexibility to my feet.

While being conscious of the image of swimming with his thighs, he flexibly cleaves through the water.

On the verge of being lined up to with just a little remaining, barely getting away, Rin was able to connect to Haruka.

Haruka dives in over Rin's head. Both the angle and the water landing point are not bad. But.....

Right after landing on the water, the difference began to widen.

Rin wondered if time had stopped only for Haruka. His body isn't advancing forward. On the other hand of the difference widening between the top, he ended up being lined up to by the third place swimmer. Right after Haruka's legs and feet still aren't moving, he wondered if he'll end up drowning. Just like on that day, when he attempted to pick up Aki's scarf.....

After the turn, retreating until third place, in the end the fourth place swimmer also began to line up to him, but even so, Haruka just repeated the fundamental movements.

It was after he retreated to fourth place that Haruka's hand reached the goal at last. His breathing is so rough, while his shoulders largely heave up and down, that you wouldn't even think that he only swam just 100m.

Without grabbing onto Makoto's held out hand, when he climbs up onto the poolside, tearing off his goggles and cap, he started walking towards the locker room. He passed by Aki on the way, but he wouldn't even look at her. Everyone silently sees Haruka off. Nobody knew what words to say to the current Haruka. There was nothing better than silently seeing him off.

Soon, Haruka's figure disappeared into the locker room.



When the morning sun finally began to rise from the edge of Myoujinyama, Rin was in front of a grave. The cold air that contained the tide flows so it grazes his cheek. The waves breaking onto the steep cliff, the peaceful sound rose and broke. On the sky that began to turn white, wispy purple clouds trailing, it created many patterns that looked like stripes drawn in pastel crayons.

The grave was firmly sitting faced towards the sea. To Rin, its dignified shape, without a single time to regret, seemed like it was sticking its chest out. While making him feel something that had the appearance of a profound dignity, it calmly overlooks the sea.

Rin was standing in front of that grave. He was facing the grave the whole time from when it was still dark out. The sky that is regaining its brightness makes the lines of Myoujinyama's ridge rise to the surface.

"It ends with today. I came to say goodbye. I, decided to try and pursue the dream. I don't know how far I can go, but I'm thinking of going as far as I can. So, I can't come here for a while. Please forgive me, okay? But, I'm glad that I came here after all. I'm glad I met those guys. Because it gave me the motivation to seriously pursue the dream..... No matter where I go, I absolutely won't forget. Just them, I absolutely won't. I.... I want to win just today. Just today, I want to do the best swimming. I want to become a real team with those guys. So, today, I'll tell them properly. Everything, all of it as it is..... So, please look out for me, okay?"

Making a fist, he lightly bumps the gravestone. A cool sensation passed to him.

"Pops."

The wind blowing from the sea coils around Rin, then disappears.

".....Pops."

He murmurs again.

Could the tide be rising? The sound of the waves hitting the rock broke, while drowning out the cries of the sea gulls. Looking up as he feels a strong light, the sun that had shown its face from Myoujinyama began to shine on the earth and sea without distinguishing between them.

Taking a deep breath from the air that contained tide, Rin filled up his chest with it. Then, he turns back to the grave.

"Well then, I'll be on my way."

Showing a gentle smile, Rin began to run towards the place of the deciding battle.



"Hey hey, what place should we get in the semifinal?"

While changing their clothes in the locker room, Nagisa asked Makoto in his usual manner.

"We can go to the finals if we're within the top 8 overall."

Makoto replied while adjusting the length of his goggles.

"First place. If you say something easy-going as eighth, we'll end up losing!"

While putting emphasis on the end of the word, when Rin claps Nagisa on the back, a nice dry sound resounded across the locker room.

"That hurt! What're you doing, Rin-chan?"

From the other side of the locker, suddenly laughter breaking out, Sousuke peeks at them.

"What, Rin. You're called Rin-chan over there, too?"

Saying that, he laughed again. Being laughed at, Rin hastily denies it.

"N-no, that's wrong. It's just this guy. Everyone calls me leader here."

This time, Makoto speaks while doubling over in laughter.

"Is that so? Rinrin."

Laughter rose from the other side of the locker again. Rin turns around to face Makoto.

"Makoto. You, be a little more tactful."

When Rin says that, laughter broke out again. Makoto and Nagisa were both laughing. Even Rin, who was supposed to be angry, his cheeks soften as he's infected by it. However, looking at Haruka sitting on the bench, such a merry mood ended up being blown off to somewhere.

Haruka was staring at some distant point, alone and quietly. They haven't heard Haruka say a single word since morning. Nobody could talk to Haruka. Without displaying a single thing resembling emotion, he was just expressionlessly staring into the distance. If it weren't for what happened yesterday, perhaps they could've thought of it as the usual Haruka. The Haruka who always lives up to the expectations if you rely on him. But.....

Inside Rin, something begins to burn.

—We're a team, Haru. Believe, in us!

He's not swimming alone. Those feelings are running about all throughout his body.

Closing the door of the locker, Rin snapped the rubber of his goggles.

"All right, let's go!"



Aki touched the goal in first place. She worries more about the time than the placing. When she turns around to look at the clock, it was indicating a good time, the kind that they didn't easily get even in practice.

"All right!"

In the water, Aki tightly grasped her fist a little. It was completely different from yesterday. Her body moved just like she had practiced. She was able to swim with her feelings packed into it more than during practice.

—It's going well. At this rate, we can absolutely compete for the top even in the finals!

She was able to firmly believe in that.

When she's pulled up by Yuuki's hand, everyone welcomed her with a smile.

"You did it, Zaki."

"Yeah, the finals are next."

"We got a good time, huh?"

"Really, it'll absolutely go well with that."

The four of their expressions were completely different from yesterday, too. Everyone realized that the team's mood had risen.

Remaining like that near the poolside's entranceway, Aki and the others decided to root for the boys. The girls' second race finishing, Sano SC reached the goal in top in the boys' first race. It's the swimming club that Rin was in.

The boys' second group heading towards the starting position pass by in front of Aki. Makoto's smile was among them.

"Congrats, Zaki-chan. Good luck in the next one, too."

"Yeah, thanks. Good luck to you, too, Tachibana-kun."

Makoto's raised hand overlapping with Aki's hand, he passes by, making a snapping sound.



While heading towards the starting position, Makoto moved his gaze to the pool with small waves rising on it.

His fear of the water hasn't disappeared yet. The feeling that there's a monster lurking in there is still inside his mind. The feeling that he might end up being sucked into, entangled and dragged in was still clinging to him.

Supposing that if this was an individual contest, perhaps his foot would've been cramping up even now and in this place. Without advancing a single step forward, perhaps he would've been standing still. However, he has friends now. He has a team that he swam together with. If he were to say that they help each other or support each other, perhaps Haruka would get angry at him. But Makoto certainly felt supported right now. Perhaps he's not helping anyone, perhaps he doesn't even have the strength for it. However, it was a fact with no falseness to it that he was being supported. Makoto was standing here, being supported by his friends.

The feeling of wanting to win comes welling up, strongly and intensely, unlike before. His chest, his back, his arms, his feet, then the depths of his body are heating up. It's not for the sake of someone, for the sake of something, much less for the sake of himself. Making an effort and worrying with everyone, they struggled for the sake of winning. So that's why he feels that he wants to win. In just this feeling, he won't lose to anyone. He won't surrender to anyone.

".....Haru."

Murmuring it so quietly that no one else can hear, he looks at Haru. Then, tightly squeezing his right fist, Makoto stepped his foot into the water's edge.





"Hey, Haru-chan."

Nagisa talked to him at the time that the race was about to start. He hasn't spoken to anyone yet today. No one could come in contact with Haruka. However, Nagisa nonchalantly jumped over his defenses. To the point that it suddenly made him think that what he was obsessing over is a trivial matter, all too soon and easily.

"What should I do? I'm starting to feel nervous."

Nagisa says without even showing such behavior. Haruka raised the corner of his mouth a little.

"You are? What a joke."

"It's true. C'mon look, my palms are drenched with sweat. Even my feet are shaking."

Saying that, he shows his knees shaking. Unable to estimate how much of it he's doing sincerely, when he lightly pokes his head, Nagisa stopping the movements of his knees, he embarrassedly cast his eyes down.

"Sorry, I lied about my feet. But I really am nervous. I ended up failing the start yesterday, so I keep thinking about what'll I do if I end up failing again today. And so, if we don't win, it'll end up being my fault after all, won't it?"

What Nagisa was saying, was something extremely simple. Finding the honest feelings inside himself that aren't embellished with anything, he puts it into words. If it's childish or pure, in any case, it was something that Haruka couldn't imitate.

"Don't think about boring things."

"It's not boring. It's something very important."

That may be so for Nagisa, but thinking it to be a boring thing after all, Haruka took a little breath.

"Then, if someone overtakes you, do you think it's their fault that you lost?"

"Eeh, I don't think so. Such a thing." [this sounds extra awkward but I wanted to keep Nagisa's fragmented way of saying it]

Instead of saying something, Haruka stared into Nagisa's eyes. Haruka and Nagisa mutually peek into the depths of each other's eyes. Because of that, Nagisa finally realized that there's a contradiction in what he's saying.

"Ah, I see. But I'll still end up feeling responsible for it."

“As much as feeling responsible, say that sort of thing after you’ve gotten faster.”

“Ah, I see. Huh? Somehow, I’m suddenly at ease. My nervousness ended up disappearing after talking to Haru-chan.”

Haruka raised the corner of his mouth again, while thinking that he’s a weird guy, whether it is from simplicity or something else.



The first swimmer is Makoto, the second is Nagisa, the third is Rin, the anchor is Haruka. Naturally, it’s the same order as yesterday, but he didn’t intend to make the same result.

Beating the top time in the previous race, it’s certain that Sano SC advances to the finals. While letting the feeling of swimming against Sousuke again burn his chest, Rin was looking at Makoto waiting for the starting signal.

After four short whistles, submerging on the long whistle. On the next long whistle, seizing the grip.

“Take your marks!”

—Silence—

Simultaneously with the short buzzer sound, all the swimmers leap all at once. When their heads came up, Makoto stood at the top. He keeps a beautiful streamline.

In any swimming style, being conscious of the streamline is an important matter, but it’s especially difficult for the backstroke. The cause of it was in the complicatedness of the S-shaped pull. Submerging the hand from the top of the head, since it has to rotate deeply, it isn’t stable if the shoulders are stiff. If the rolling’s inclination is made big for the sake of compensating for that, the body ends up sinking next time and speed decreases. In the state of having balanced the streamline, to perform the highly efficient S-shaped pull, the softness of the shoulders is essential.

In Makoto’s case, the softness of his shoulders was of first-class quality. He’s capable of bringing forward the hand that was in the back over his head.

Reversing at the turn, he kicks the wall. Then, when he commences the strokes, rapidly stretching again, he separates from the other swimmers.

Rin thought that Makoto is suited for the backstroke. It's true for the softness of his shoulders, but his back is also strong. The backstroke isn't "swimming on your back", it's a matter of "swimming with your back". The strength of the back balancing the rolling, it draws a beautiful S-shaped pull.

Simultaneously with the push, you stretch your hand that's on the entry side. Making use of the force attempting to return from the reaction of having stretched, you catch the water. There's no futility at all in the sequence of motions. Because the strength of the back is balancing the rolling.

Repeating the powerful strokes while raising splashes, Makoto touched the wall as he kept top position.

Nagisa leaps. His timing was late by a little. Also, it's the usual clumsy dive. One pull, one kick. Even so, he somehow manages to rise to the surface as he keeps top position.

Compared to other swimming styles, there was a reason why Nagisa's specialty was the breaststroke. His ankles are soft. When you hold down his toes by hand, it ends up connecting to his shin. In other words, right behind it, that was also capable of kicking the water with the entirety of the sole of his foot.

But, even among the four swimming styles, since the breaststroke uses up the most physical strength, Nagisa always ends up stalling once, before the 50m point. Even now he's being overtaken by one person, he ended up being overtaken immediately following the turn. Perhaps Nagisa is repeatedly saying 'I got overtaken' in his head. When that turned into 'I'll overtake them in return', he plays his trump card.

Upkick—. By pulling his foot back while moving his dolphin kick upward, he not only decreases the water's resistance, but that movement itself also becomes propulsive power. This is not something that you can do after being taught. If you don't have that something like an innate sense, it wasn't a way of swimming that everyone can do. For this reason, for Nagisa, who's the type who remembers with his body, perhaps it's fitting. Or, does that butterfly practice bear its fruits? If that is the case, it's something that was outside of being taught.

However, that wasn't the only reason for Nagisa's acceleration. There's something else that can't be explained with words. Something else that isn't understood unless someone is swimming lined up to him. Putting it one way, it's something like spirit, but it also differs from that. That noisy sensation.....

Rapidly stretching, when he lines up to the second place swimmer, that swimmer's balance breaks and he retreats. From there, stretching again, there's a little difference with first place as he makes the touch.

Rin shoots out from a crouching start. He thought that his body is light while diving. It felt like he could fly anywhere.

— I'm not landing on the water!

He's still in the air. Though his senses are steadily going forward, time isn't keeping up. Both the world around him and his own body, everything seemed to have stopped. Bewildered at the unbalance between time and senses, the bewilderment was expressed by becoming a tremor of his body. Already late when he thought that he's done for, Rin failed at the landing on the water.

Largely dropping their rank, he retreats to fifth place. Rin, whose best feature is the dash power, ended up failing at the start. There is no reason to be patient. The time to spare on calming down and thinking about something ended up being blown off to somewhere. He can't be composed anymore. With the exception of recklessly pushing on, he couldn't think of anything else any more.

The race's pace wasn't that fast. If it was the usual Rin, even if he bears the start's failure in mind, he was supposed to be able to sufficiently compete for the top. However, until making the 50m turn, he wasn't capable of regaining himself.

He somehow managed to gain on, but he was barely in fourth place when he made the touch. He didn't even have the leisure to see off Haruka diving in overhead.

All of a sudden, feeling a light, he turns around. Haruka was swimming. Haruka was swimming while emitting light. The powerful energy becoming light, it was dazzlingly emitted from Haruka.

Rin couldn't move. He couldn't take his eyes off of him. Spreading his wings like a water bird dancing in the skies, Rin's heart was snatched away by Haruka, swimming as if he was gliding.

It was after Haruka had made the 50m turn that Rin somehow climbed up onto the poolside, pulled by Makoto's hand. Bearing an overwhelming difference, Haruka's head rises to the surface. He commences the strokes from there. A catch that seems to embrace closely. A kick that bends softly with elegance. A rolling that seems to flow. Then, from that peaceful form, a high speed that can't even be imagined.

The sight that transcended reality fascinated and didn't let go of not only Rin, but everyone watching. No, they're not watching. They're feeling it. No one here could have possibly kept from feeling the heatedly throbbing beat.

Haruka touched the goal. Without looking at the time, he lightly climbs up onto the poolside. In a manner so light that you would almost end up forgetting that he was in a race.

Even after having finished swimming, the energy that wouldn't cool down yet kept peacefully emitting from Haruka's body. Pressed down by that energy, no one was able to get close to him. They can't move.

Haruka got faster again. And yet, not even regret is welling up. He could only be exposed to Haruka's emitting energy.

Rin looks at his hand. It was trembling slightly. It's not just Rin. Makoto's back was also trembling. Nagisa's feet were also trembling so much that he couldn't walk.

Walking up to Nagisa, Haruka puts his right hand on his shoulder. At that moment, Nagisa's eyes were flooding with tears. Cries flooded from Nagisa's mouth. While hugging Haruka, he cried, raising a large voice. Unafraid of what the other people around may think, he sobbed, clinging to Haruka.



Haruka put his hand on Nagisa's head, without being surprised or bewildered.

"Next are, the finals."

"Yeah, Haru-chan. Haru-chan!"

After he looked up at Haruka's face, Nagisa cried on Haruka's chest again.



In the locker room, voices of delight and voices of consolation were mingled together in a mess. And, the thread of nervousness being stretched around inside it. The finals are held after this in every contest. Both the free that Haruka was supposed to swim in and the breaststroke that Makoto was supposed to swim in. And also the medley relay that the four of them are swimming in.

Haruka and the others all sat on the bench in silence. With a little reddish tinge remaining in his eyes, the irregularity of his breathing gone, Nagisa had completely regained his composure. While lightly rotating his shoulders, Makoto was boosting his concentration for facing the finals. Haruka was just expressionlessly staring at a spot. If it were to be compared, with a gaze that seemed to be staring at the future.

And Rin was still hesitating.

Even though he was supposed to have decided to face them seriously, no matter what, he couldn't take one more step forward. Even though it might put him at ease if he told them everything.....

No, he's not telling them for the sake of being eased. He's telling them for the sake of becoming a true team. He can't do the best swimming as long as he's hiding his own feelings. It can't be possible. Even though he understands that, his still hesitant self was helplessly chagrined.

"Matsuoka."

His name suddenly called, he looks at Haruka. Haruka's gaze was still facing towards a distant place somewhere else.

"Earlier, what happened?"

It wasn't a blaming tone. He's asking because he really doesn't know. That's what it felt like.



— Because you swam like that yesterday.....

He stopped thinking about considering it that far. No matter how many excuses you make, nothing will start. Could he have been nervous? That is also possible. Rather, he might've put in too much fighting spirit. Thinking too much that he has to do it, his spirits rising higher than necessary, he lost his calm judgment. But there's nothing to do about it, understanding it by this time.

"Sorry."

He honestly apologized. Those were the only words he could find.

Haruka turns his gaze towards Rin.

"Sorry, for making you worry too much."

Haruka said it in a voice that was barely audible. While slowly breathing out the air trapped in his chest, Rin felt his mood becoming lighter.

— Don't apologize. It's fine if you just swim the way you like.

Nodding his head with a smile, Rin replied to Haruka in silence.

That's how it was. Even if they struggled on their way to get here, it can't be helped. Makoto is looking at Rin, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows. Rin is reflected in Nagisa's transparent eyes. There's no need at all to hide it or fancy it up now. It's fine if he tells them with the intention of laying out the truth.

"Thanks, everyone. For going along with my selfishness this far."

As Rin says it, Makoto showed his usual smile.

"We're not really going along. We're all here because we want to be here."

"That's right. That's how it was."

It was unreasonable for Makoto to say that, and it made him feel bad. Making them go along with tough practice, he also got them to hold back from events other than the medley relay. So, of course he's grateful. So, of course he has to tell them. The truth—.

"There's something that I've been hesitant to say all along. The next race, it's the last even if we cry or smile. So before that, I still want to tell you. It's, the story of my pops...."

There, he cuts his words short once. The three of them were looking at Rin without saying anything.

Strengthening his resolve, Rin takes a deep breath. A long, long one, like before starting a dive.

"My dad was in the first generation of Iwatobi SC. There are photos displayed in the break room. Pops is in them."

It's the group photo they take every year in March. That endmost, oldest photo. The one with the boy holding the trophy and happily laughing in the middle.

"Apparently, Pops won the medley relay championship when he was in sixth grade. His dream for the future was to become an Olympic swimmer."

It's a really childlike dream. Laughably so. Like that, Rin tries to curl the corner of his lip, but it didn't turn into a smile that well.

"In the end, Pops couldn't become an Olympic swimmer, he became a fisherman."

He cuts his words. He hesitates on the next words. Makoto pulls together his eight-shaped eyebrows. Haruka narrows his eyes. Nagisa's throat moves a little.

Cheering up his heart that began to look down, Rin lifted his face.

"He became a fisherman..... and ended up sinking. I hear that it was in a place that wasn't even 3 km away from the fishing harbor."

A mute sound escaped from Makoto's throat.

"Haru....."

He looks at Haruka, like he's depending on him. Haruka looks back at Makoto. These two were able to have a conversation in silence. Most likely, they're confirming with each other what happened so many years ago.

Looking at that happen, Rin was able to confirm that those two from that time were Haruka and Makoto.

Haruka turns towards Rin with a grim expression.

"Did we.... meet?"

Rin nodded while lightly showing a smile.

"Seems so....."

He was walking while holding his sister's hand. The grieving figures of the people around them were more painful than his father's passing. Suddenly, feeling someone's eyes on him, when he turns around, two children around the same age

as him were motionlessly staring at Rin and the others. Firmly wiping his tears, when he stares back at them, the two had already run off to somewhere.

"Since when did you know?"

Haruka asks.

"When Haru fell in the river and was carried by the ambulance, Makoto held onto the edge of Haru's clothes all along."

Holding onto just the edge of his clothes, he kept calling Haruka's name while shaking.

"I thought that might be the case at that time. I thought so, looking at Makoto's hand gripping your clothes."

Haruka and Makoto look at each other. Then, they have a conversation in silence again.

Rin continued his story.

"I decided to go to Australia. After deciding that, I wanted to speak to Pops very much. To be honest, I don't even remember his face and I don't have a single memory of him left. When he went out fishing, since apparently he didn't come home for days, it's understandable....."

Haruka asks Rin.

"Did you speak to him?"

"I don't know. Not yet, probably..... I just thought that if I went to the same swimming club as Pops, after winning the championship in the medley relay, maybe I could, see the same dream. But that's unrelated to everyone, it's kinda embarrassing a little, so that's why I kept silent..... But I thought that I have to face you all up front, or we can't become a true team. It's a very selfish story, but I really thought so. I, with you all, I want to become a true... the best team!"

Rin's eyes heat up. Something hot flows out. He looks at Haruka with those eyes. He looks at Makoto. He looks at Nagisa. He thought that he doesn't mind even if he peeks into the depths of his eyes. He thought that he doesn't mind even if he exposes all of himself. If it's to these best teammates.

"The first time I called out. After I lost to Haruka. That time, I was kinda happy, that there's a fast guy at Iwatobi SC. Since I was just like you guys, I became strangely curious, every time we met, I thought that we might make a good team. It's true."

Rin sniffled once.

"That's the reason. Thanks."

It was the reply to the question that Makoto had asked days before. That time when Rin said that he only wanted to swim in the relay, Makoto asked him why he was so obsessed with the relay, it's to that.....

Nagisa asked Rin, while rubbing his eyes that wore a new reddish tinge.

"But hey, the people at Sano SC who were your friends all along, aren't they mad?"

Wiping at the corner of his eyes once, Rin shows Nagisa a laugh.

"I got them to properly understand. Besides, it's better if I'm not on the same team as Sousuke."

"Sousuke's the person who swam with Rin-chan yesterday?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because we understand each other too well. He's even more theoretical than I am, we often quarreled. So, we settled on it that the faster way is always correct, but our competitive spirit wasn't half-baked anymore. It's a hard thing, being birds of a feather."

"Do you hate him?"

"I don't hate him. Rather, I still think of him as the person who understands me the most. But sometimes, it becomes difficult to be together..... When I end up understanding his feelings, I end up not being able to say the things that I want to. I can no longer seriously go up against him. That's not a friend, it's like an alter-ego, isn't it? You don't like or hate your alter-ego. Ending up like that, no longer thinking of them as a friend, it's really painful..... It's that swimming with nonsensical guys like you is more amusing. Though there's a lot of trouble, too. "

"What do you mean by nonsensical?"

"Like, a guy whose arms stretch right before the goal."

"Is that me?"

"Like, a guy who wastefully swims with all his power."

"That's Mako-chan, huh?"

"Like, a guy who does an unbelievable swimming once you think it's no use."

"Haru-chan was amazing, huh?"

"You guys really are a bunch of weirdos."

Raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, Makoto shows a carefree smile.

"There's a crybaby romanticist who speaks of his dream, too, huh?"

Rin wanted to answer something back to that, but thinking that it's just like that, his mouth opened into a broad smile.

He tries and thinks about what his father's team was like. Since they won the championship, they were surely a good team, though.

—But hey, Pops. Sorry but this team is the best!

The announcement informing the beginning of the finals was heard in the locker room. The invisible thread of nervousness stretches around, while complicatedly entangling.

Equipping his goggles, Rin snapped the rubber.

"The last one settles it!"

"Yeah!"

While raising his eight-shaped eyebrows, Makoto sticks his chest out.

"All right!"

Nagisa makes a sound with the goggles' rubber, imitating Rin.

And, Haruka quietly emits the strong energy from his body.

It suddenly felt like the wind was blowing. It was a wind that contained the salt water's scent a little. He thought that it was quite similar to Mutsukibashi's wind. That wind blew through the locker room without a sound, as if it was inviting the four of them to the place of the finals.



"It's tomorrow, right?"

While lining up at the starting block, Sousuke talked to Rin from beside him. He's confirming that tomorrow is the day that he departs to Australia.

"Yeah, next is way ahead."

Rin replies that the next time they swim together will be way ahead.

"Then, gotta win today."

"That's how it is."

If he ends up losing today, he'll end up carrying that regret for many years to come. They mutually recognized that.

It was only that much of a conversation. The oath to certainly compete against each other again many years ahead was put into only that much of a conversation. It was a promise that meant that they'll only put in the strength of competing against each other. Just that much was enough.



Makoto waited for the starting signal, seizing his grip.

"Take your marks!"

—Silence—

Short buzzer sound.

Makoto leaps backwards. Then, landing on the water. The sensation of being roughly tasted by the large monster. The feeling that believes that the water is scary is still there. However, his body didn't cower anymore. Even if the 'fear' is still clinging to a corner of his heart, now the feeling of connecting to everyone had won. That feeling takes priority over everything else.

He mustn't run away anymore. He'll push forward to the limits of his strength. That's what his heart commands. There's no need at all to hesitate. Only to swim with all his power.

While rising to the surface, he commences the strokes. He narrows his eyes to the blueness of the sky. Even being indoors, even with his goggles on, he was able to feel the radiance of the sky. Makoto felt so good while swimming that he almost forgot that he was in a race.

When he rises to the surface after making the turn, the shape of Makoto's splashes changed a little. Simultaneously, the scent of salt water wraps up his body. It was a strange sensation. No, it's not just a sensation. The things he sees with his eyes, the things he hears with his ears, all of it changed to the sea. Reflecting the blue sky filled with light, the rolling sea surface was peacefully creating a diffused reflection.

Makoto was swimming in the middle of a vast expanse of sea now.

It's been years since he last swam in the sea. However, there's no fear. He even thinks that it feels good. There's surely a monster in this water, too. There's no doubt about it, it's lurking at the bottom of the deep sea, and it'll soon be attacking Makoto.

However, there was something that Makoto had to do now. He had a mission to complete at any cost. To reach Haruka, Haruka and the others, faster than anyone else. If it's for the sake of that mission, no matter what kind of monster it may be, it wasn't worthy of fearing.

Kicking up the waves, Makoto became a marine animal. Striking his tail fin, bending his whole body, while powerfully brushing away the water, he pushes on. Faster, faster than any animal living in the sea.

—Reach!

Hitting the wall with his feelings packed into it, he shouts while raising his body.

“Go, Nagisa!”

Nagisa's body fluttering in midair, he makes the landing on the water at a beautiful angle. The water's surface as the border, the world surrounding Nagisa changes. Light and sound both, everything peacefully starts to sway. Then, Nagisa fully ascended to the height of simple thought. Just to the one point of swimming fast.

He kicks the mass of water with a heavy impact. Seizing the water, he rapidly pushes his way through. He turns his conscious towards forward, forward. He doesn't feel the exhaustion of his physical strength. He can still go. He can still swim. Like this, it feels like he could advance to anywhere.

He makes the turn, touching the surface of the wall with both hands. One pull, one kick.

Suddenly, he noticed that someone is swimming in front of him. They're in the same lane. He thinks that it's not possible, but somebody was definitely swimming. He tries to turn his consciousness to who it may be. At that moment, feeling the emission of a strong energy, his chest became hot.



— It's Haru-chan!

There's no doubt about it. Haruka is swimming in front of him.

— Come and keep up.

Haruka says.

— Yeah, Haru-chan.

While thinking that he absolutely won't be separated, his arm stretches.

— You've gotten pretty fast, haven't you?

— Mako-chan.

Before he knew it, Makoto was swimming on Nagisa's right side.

— Really? I've gotten faster?

Rin comes lining up to him on the left side.

— You've practiced so much. It'd be strange if you hadn't gotten faster.

— Rin-chan.

— Well, you can't beat me, though.

— I can swim faster than Rin-chan.

— You're telling me, huh. Then try proving it.

— All right.

— You shouldn't try too hard, Nagisa. You have to loosen up more.

— But, we can't win unless I try my best, can we?

— Trying your best is fine, but you shouldn't put in futile strength.

— Haha, Mako-chan is always swimming with all his strength.

— I'm gonna leave you behind if you chatter.

— Ah, wait up. Haru-chan.

The wind that blew on Mutsukibashi pushes Nagisa from behind.

— How far are we going? Haru-chan.

— You know, of course. To the goal.

— Yeah!

Nagisa's arms stretch another stage. His body riding the water, acquiring even more lifting power, he accelerates. Glad that he's swimming together with everyone, he strongly feels that he wants to swim faster for this reason. Packing that feeling into it, he touched the wall.

"Rin-chan, good luck!"

Rin shoots out from the crouching start posture. He was even able to accurately measure the slight difference from Nagisa's touch to when his feet kick off from the starting block. The bizarre concentration that he felt in the earlier race visited Rin again. However, it doesn't bewilder him anymore. He doesn't lose sight of himself anymore. So calmly that it's surprising, he was able to judge the situation. There's no unnecessary nervousness or fighting spirit or anything at all. There was only the certain feeling that he wanted to connect to Haruka with the best swimming. Then, the concentration that has crossed its utmost limits makes Rin rapidly evolve.

Among the eight swimmers in the race, even now that he's fluttering in midair, he was able to accurately know who's in which position. He's landing on the water from his fingertips at the ideal angle. He even distinctly knew the shapes of the splashes rising. He feels it without seeing it with his eyes. He was able to count to the single fine bubble made underwater.

He commences the strokes from the dolphin kick. Catch, then keyhole pull. He doesn't even feel the smallest particle out of order. He was able to look down on his own form from right overhead. It's not an image. He's actually seeing it. Inside his retina, it tightly bound the picture. If he were to extend his field of vision, he can also see the form of everyone swimming right now. Just now, he was able to know without the tiniest bit of confusion even that Sousuke had made the start. It seems like he can even hear his breathing.

— Pops.....

After the turn, those words suddenly passed by a corner of his mind. Perhaps Sousuke would say to not think about unnecessary things when swimming. However, even without thinking about it, it steadily occupies his mind. It's not that he's making too much of it. As a certain truth, it wells up from the depths of his heart.

—Is Pops showing me this sight?

His chest getting hot, that temperature is conveyed to his arms, to his legs. Exceeding the ideal, a yet unseen world spreads out before his eyes. The future

that's filled with light to the point of overflowing. Rin stretched his arms out towards the direction that light shines.

— I'll show you. The extraordinary sight, that can't be seen unless it's the four of us!

Rin's hand touches the surface of the wall. Then, lifting his face, he shouts to Haruka diving overhead.



“Haru!”

Haruka fluttered in midair while hearing Rin's voice. Even though he's a companion that irritates him so much, he feels an unusual pleasantness. Finding it strange for himself to be like that, he ends up smiling.

Making the landing on the water, he slips his body in. Without forcibly pressing it down or denying it. They're not becoming one body, nor is he excluding it. Accepting each other's existence, they recognize each other.

Detesting his self that relied on water, he attempted to be strong. The more he thinks about it like that, the water coils around him, heavily persisting, it attempted to snatch away his freedom like shackles. And yet, Haruka just recklessly swam, just moving his hands and feet blindly. Having long forgotten things such as feeling the water.

The result of that is in yesterday's race. It was a sensation like dropping into the abyss possessing an infinite deepness, to anywhere.

Just before the semifinals, when Nagisa talked to him, he thought about how he's reflected in those eyes. Nagisa was staring only at swimming faster, straight ahead, without doubting anything. His self reflected in those eyes was helplessly hesitating. Wavering with hesitation, he was wandering about. And, he was weakly seeking help.

If he keeps fighting against the existence called water like that, what will he see ahead? Or, if he starts depending on it again, is it something that he should honestly accept? Seeking help from someone, while attempting to rely on something, he was attempting to deny such a weak self.

—What are you doing?

In the earlier race, it's what he thought while watching Rin swim. And, these are words that he has also said to himself like that. Both depending on the water to heal his weak self and refusing the water to become strong, in the end, it was the same thing. Just as Nagisa keeps being like Nagisa, it's fine as long as he keeps being like himself. That was the light that he had found while aimlessly wandering in the dark, deep water.

A strong energy fills his body from within. He didn't intend to hold it back anymore. Makoto's feelings burn inside Haruka. Nagisa's feelings give wings to Haruka. Rin's feelings becoming the wind, it makes Haruka accelerate. He wasn't hesitant about anything anymore. He swims, just strongly believing in his feelings. That's all it was.

Inside his chest, the very depths of it helplessly begins to heat up. Just like a flame bursting out, his body gets hotter. The moment that sparkling splashes touched his body, it all evaporates and disappears. His arms and legs burnt red are steadily heating up.

Before long, Haruka becoming a single ray of light, he pierced through the water with a dazzling high speed. He tremendously headed towards the goal in the distance.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Sakura*

When you go around to the back of Iwatobi SC, there is a small garden, which could also be gazed from the poolside. In that rear garden, crowded with various kinds of trees planted, it showed a different look with each season. Beginning the maintenances such as cleaning and watering, as well as replanting and pruning, since all of it is done by the superintendent on his own, in a certain sense, it could also be said that this rear garden was developed according to the superintendent's tastes.

Its reputation was quite renowned that all year round, some sort of flowers blooming, it delighted the eyes of the people going to the club from beyond the glass. Red camellias in winter. From rape blossoms to azaleas in spring. The early summer hydrangeas, inflating like soap bubbles, bellflowers follow after them. The scent of autumn's fragrant olive was so vivid that it enveloped the poolside in it.

Now in particular, the rape blossoms' yellow is coloring the rear garden.

Rin and Nagisa, the three of them with Haruka, were waiting for Makoto in the rear garden.

"Hey, Rin-chan. What do you wanna do with burying something like a trophy?"

Nagisa asked.

"That's something the four of us won together, so wouldn't it be weird if one person took it home?"

"Then, what if we had it displayed in the club?"

The trophies and shields acquired individually from the competition can be kept individually, but if someone wishes to, getting the club to keep it safe, they could also get it to be placed in the display.

"It's fine. It's not something to show off to people. It's a trophy just for us. So, we're burying it as a proof of our friendship. Well, it's something like a time capsule."

"Then, will it stay buried forever?"

"No. Someday, the day will surely come when we have to remember what happened today, today's medley relay. When that day comes, we'll dig it up again."



“When's that?”

“Who knows. If it's five years or ten years later, we'll only know when it's that time.”

The rear entrance's door opening, Makoto came out. He's holding the trophy and several gardening shovels in his hands.

“Sorry for the wait. I got the superintendent's permission. And I borrowed shovels, too.”

Burying it arbitrarily, having it be discovered when the flowers are replanted, since they'd be in trouble if it was disposed of, they decided to get permission just in case. Temporarily taking back the trophy and shield to the club, after the commemoration photographing, they decided to listen to each of their wishes. And then, Makoto took charge of it.

“All right. Then, shall we?”

Opening the bag he had left aside, Rin took out a big, empty cookie tin from inside it.

“You're amazing, Rin-chan. Are you always carrying that?”

Nagisa saying that, Rin is astonished.

“No way. Just today.”

“Ah, by any chance, is it the one that your little sister Kou-chan brought——”

“Yeah. This.”

“Whaaat. You should've left it.”

“If I take it out with that timing, it would really make me ‘luck-pusher’, wouldn't it?”

Makoto asked while distributing the shovels.

“But hey, did you know from the start that we'll get a trophy?”

“That goes without saying, Makoto. Surely you didn't think that we can't win the championship?”

Rin opens the lid of the empty tin.

“It's not like that, but I just thought what amazing self-confidence you have.”

Makoto hands over the trophy to Rin. With a size that can be handled with one hand, there's a relief in the shape of the starting posture in the top part, from a distance it looked like a bird spreading its wings.

When they try putting it in the cookie tin, it went into it exactly.

"Wow, it fits right in, huh?"

Nagisa is surprised.

"Of course it does. It's the same as last year."

Rin was also the champion in 50m breaststroke and free last year.

"So where did the superintendent say that we can bury it?"

While closing the lid, Rin asked Makoto.

"Around the lower part of the camellias."

"Which ones are the camellias?"

As Makoto and Rin are taking an extensive view of the rear garden after Nagisa asked, Haruka pointed his finger.

"That's it."

"You're amazing, Haru. You knew."

Makoto admires him, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"When the red flowers began to bloom, Yazaki told me."

Holding the shovel and the tin, Rin goes towards the camellias.

"All right, let's dig."

As Rin sticks the shovel into the earth, Makoto and Nagisa also began to dig in the same spot. However, the earth was unexpectedly hard, they can't dig through it as easily as they thought.

"Haru. Don't just watch, give us a hand."

As Rins says it, throwing aside the gardening shovel, Haruka went into the club through the rear entrance.

"Tsk, what a selfish guy."

Reluctantly, when the three of them are digging again, Haruka came back, carrying a large shovel.

"If you do it neatly with those, night's gonna fall."

Sticking the shovel into the ground right after he says it, forcibly stepping on it with his feet, he began to dig with a thudding sound. The gardening shovels completely getting their turn taken, the three of them ended up just gazing at Haruka's manner of digging.

Suddenly, Haruka's feet that was stepping on it, stopped.

"What happened? Haru."

Makoto asked.

"Something's there."

"What is it?"

Nagisa peeks at it.

".....A box?"

With the gardening shovel, Makoto cautiously tries to dig it up.

"This is a 'toolbox'. There was a preceding visitor, huh."

Rin peeks at it, too. The 'toolbox' was in a transparent vinyl bag.

"A name.... is written on it."

When Makoto brushes off the earth, the letters on it read 'Matsuoka Rin'.

"Me? Ah, this, it's what I used in kindergarten. But, why?"

As Rin is staring at the box, Haruka spoke.

"You'll know if you try opening it."

".....Yeah."

Digging up the box, taking off the vinyl, Rin tries to open the lid. There were four gold medals inside it.

Nagisa peeks at it from beside Rin.

"'18th' is written on it, huh."

"This year is the 41st, uh, that's 23 years ago, huh."

"\_\_\_"

As Makoto says it, Rin stands up seizing the medal and began to run to the club's rear entrance. Opening the door and going inside, crossing through the lobby like that, he ran all the way to the break room that has the photographs of the successive generations of members displayed in it. Then, he stands in front of the oldest photograph at the very end. On the medal hanging on the neck of the boy holding the trophy and laughing, the letters read '18th'. He compares it with the medal in his hand. Without a doubt—.

".....Pops."

Tears roll down Rin's cheek.

That box wasn't buried 23 years ago. It's after Rin enters elementary school that he stopped using the 'toolbox'. And by that time, his father was gone. In other words, the other three must have buried it. The proof of a friendship sworn for eternity.... perhaps.

".....Pops."

After muttering it again, Rin quickly wiped away the tears with his left hand.

After that, they decided to bury the cookie tin with the trophy in it beside the 'toolbox'.



The cherry blossom had small flower buds on it. With the way they shook in the wind, it had become quite distinctly clear that they've already become soft. In three more days, they'll surely start blooming. Like they were impatiently waiting for that time, the flower buds wholly took in the spring sunshine. At the base of the cherry blossom, surrounded by the bricks turned reddish-brown, multicolored flowers are blooming one step ahead.

"It hasn't bloomed yet after all."

Rin says it without sounding that regretful.

"That's why Mako-chan said so. Of course it's too early."

Without meaning to scold him, Nagisa says it somehow funnily.

"But hey, I'm seeing it for the last time today, so I wanted to see it no matter what."

Rin was adoringly gazing at the flower buds one by one.

"But look, the flower bed's flowers are blooming. What kind of flower is this? Zaki-chan."

Squatting down, Makoto stretches his hand towards the flower. The scarf stained light brown swaying in the wind, Aki also squatted down beside Makoto.

"A pansy, I think. Probably. Actually, I don't really know either."

Saying that, she laughs. There was one more flower that bloomed.

Nagisa squatted down beside Aki. Then, discovering the messages written on the brick, one by one, he reads them out aloud.

"'Friend', 'Peace', 'Smile, 'love', 'Thank you'. Hey, which one is Mako-chan's?" [the ones in italics are originally in English]

Being asked by Nagisa, Makoto started to search for his.

"I wonder where? Uh, ah, this one."

It was right beside Nagisa's foot. Nagisa tries reading the letters written on the one he's pointing his finger at.

"It's in English. 'I swim'. It means swimming?"

"That's right. It means 'I swim'."

"Mine is next to it."

"Eh?"

When Aki points to it, Makoto raised his eight-shaped eyebrows, seeming a little surprised.

Nagisa reads it out loud.

"It's in English again. 'Best'. I know this one. It means 'best', right?"

Aki nodding, she points her finger to the brick beside it.

"Beside mine is Nanase-kun's."

"'Free'. Aah, it's free, isn't it?"

Rin points his finger from behind.

"Mine's beside it."

"'For The Team'. Team.....? What does it mean?"

"It means 'for the team', but it seems like too much of a coincidence. All four are in English, and it's kind of lined up like a phrase."

There were other bricks written in English, and it wasn't strange that some were accidentally lined up either, but it obviously feels intentional.

Aki laughed mischievously.

"I lined them up. When I was carrying the bricks to Nanase-kun, after seeing the message, I thought it was amusing. But it's really a coincidence that they ended up connecting like a phrase. It's a little surprising."

Folding his arms, Rin closes his eyes.

"This isn't a coincidence. It's fate."

To that exaggerated way of speaking, Makoto and Nagisa look at each other and burst out laughing.

"Rin-chan, you're like a terrible actor."

"Hey.....!"

When Rin turned to face Nagisa to say something back to him, Aki began to read out loud everyone's messages.

"'I Swim Best Free For The Team'."

Aki's voice that seemed like it's speaking to the pansy, flows alongside the spring breeze.

Rin, who missed his chance to complain to Nagisa, taking a single breath, brought a smile to his face.

"It somehow sounds like good words. It feels perfect for the current us."

While bringing his face closer to the bricks, Makoto tilts his neck.

"But is this really a proper phrase?"

Rin and Aki tilted their necks, too.

"Well....."

Suddenly, Nagisa points his finger at a yellow flower.

"Look. See, over there."

"Eh, where?"

Makoto and Aki look in the direction that Nagisa is pointing his finger in.

"See, inside that yellow flower."

Being told that, when the two of them bring their faces closer, there was an insect inside the flower. Its black and yellow striped abdomen can be seen. When they realized that it's a honeybee, it was at the same time that the honeybee flew out.

"Oh!"

"Eek!"

Makoto and Aki moved away from the flower bed, reflexively jumping back. However, innocently stopping at the next flower, the honeybee starts collecting nectar again.

Looking at the two of them like little children, Nagisa laughed.

"It's okay. You two are scaredy cats, huh? See."

Holding out both his hands, without leaving time to hold his breath, Nagisa caught the honeybee.

While pointing his finger at the honeybee inside Nagisa's hands, Rin says in a panic.

"O-oi, it's a bee. That."

"I know. Is Rin-chan scared, too?"

"No, that's not it. Hurry up and let it loose."

While giggling, Nagisa held out his closed hands towards Haruka's face.

"Is Haru-chan scared, too?"

"No."

Just expressionlessly, without even stirring, Haruka was fixedly looking at his hands. When Nagisa slowly opens his hands, the honeybee was crawling around with small movements, perhaps searching for nectar in his palms. Before long, when it moves its wings like it remembered how to, it flew away, grazing Haruka's cheek.

After Haruka saw the bee off, he slowly moved his gaze to Rin.



"Did you get to meet your father?"

Haruka utters the same words that Sousuke did at that time.

"Aah, well yeah. What about you? Were you able to see a great sight?"

"Probably yeah."

Makoto raises his eight-shaped eyebrows.

"I was able to see it, too. But it was kinda strange."

Nagisa spreads a whole-faced smile.

"Me too! It was a really good feeling."

His voice resounds, filling the vast schoolyard. Though it was Sunday, there was no one else there other than the five of them. A little while later when the flowers of the cherry blossom would bloom profusely, this schoolyard would be overflowing with the voices of new children again.

Aki breathed in the air that smelled like spring, filling up her chest.

"But, isn't it amazing? Winning the championship so easily. What with a new tournament record, really, it's amazing."

Imitating Aki, Makoto also tries breathing in the air. It faintly had the scent of salt water.

"Zaki-chan and the others, you properly got a bronze medal, didn't you? It's amazing."

Nodding, Aki affirms that they're amazing.

"You know, I might've come to like swimming a little more again."

Folding his arms, Rin nods. Makoto smiles, raising his eight-shaped eyebrows. Saying that he thinks so, too, Nagisa looks at Haruka. Haruka was looking up at the sky. With a distant gaze, as if he was seeking the end of the sky.

"Rin."

Haruka calling Rin's name, time stopped just for a moment. Makoto and Aki look at Haru. Then, Rin, who was called by his first name, replies like he's amused.

"What is it?"

"Are you going to pursue your father's dream?"

"I don't know. Not yet."

Even if they don't know yet, even if they can't see the goal, they can dash with all their strength for the sake of searching for it. That's the privilege that was bestowed upon them.

The cherry blossom's branches made a sound. As they turn around, the wind was blowing. That wind crossing over Haruka and the others, while wearing the spring's sunshine, it runs through the schoolyard. And when it accelerates again, it soared into the skies.

To the distant future, inviting them along.

## AFTERWORD

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who has taken my work into their hands. Having received the honorable mention in the “2nd Kyoto Animation Award” contest, I remember it like something from long ago. Never dreaming that it would be published like this at that time, I just have a thousand emotions flooding my heart now.

When participating in talks for the publication, the first thing I thought was ‘I can meet Haruka and the others again’. When I turned the pages of the manuscript after it’s been a while, they released their glittering radiance, their surging liveliness unchanged as well. Calling out ‘Yo, take care of us again’, Haruka fleetingly turned his gaze towards me, with the usual blunt expression on his face.

Sixth grade elementary school students are right in the delicate period when an adult-like way of thinking starts sprouting and as seniors, they come to have a sense of responsibility and a sense of self-reliance as an individual person. They, who’ve realized that they cannot stay as children, anguishing in hesitation and bewilderment, that anguish makes their heart grow.

Even if they’re playing sports, even if they’re studying, even when they’re playing, even when they’re crying, even if they’re just standing without doing anything, they are brightly shining.

Having thought that I wanted to depict them who are like that was the motive. Then, when I thought of making it a story about swimming, I began to write one more line.

“The water is alive.”

With this outset, the story’s direction was mostly decided. The concept is ‘the story of swimmers who’ll be called prodigies in the future, before they’ve awakened yet’. The theme is ‘through swimming, depicting the friendship and growth of the boys’. I thought of the setting and composition while writing. It was an unreasonable way of doing it, but I had the confidence to finish writing it. The power to make me believe just that was in this ‘one line’.

Then, when I was finished with writing it all, the message packed into the work finally came into sight, as if it was rising to the surface. Such as ‘Aah, so it was this sort of thing that I wanted to say.’, while thinking of it as if it’s someone else’s work, I gazed at the work that was just finished.

The message must possess a universality that isn't affected by the changes of the period and the circumstances. Because, that's why it's something that reveals a person's true nature.

As to what that is, I venture to leave it unspoken. There's no answer. The answer is what everyone felt. If you can't feel anything from it, that is the author's lack of ability. If most of the people who have taken my work into their hands each felt something, nothing makes me happier.

In the future, I feel that I want to send out more works into the world that makes even more people feel even more things.

In closing, I would like to deeply express my gratitude to everyone who has given their assistance for the publication.

2013, summer breeze weather, **Ooji Kouji**

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